STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

10 CENTS

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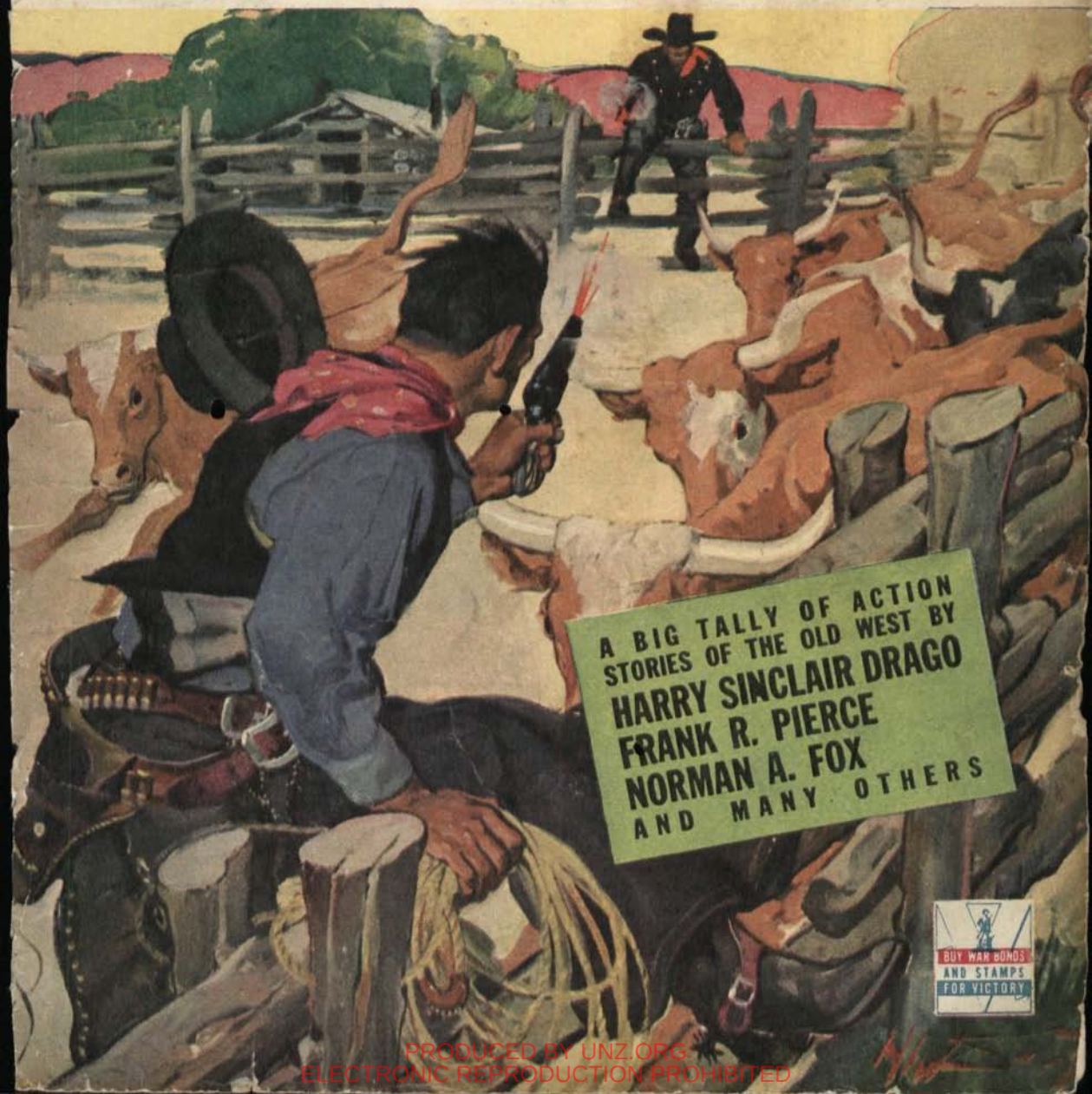

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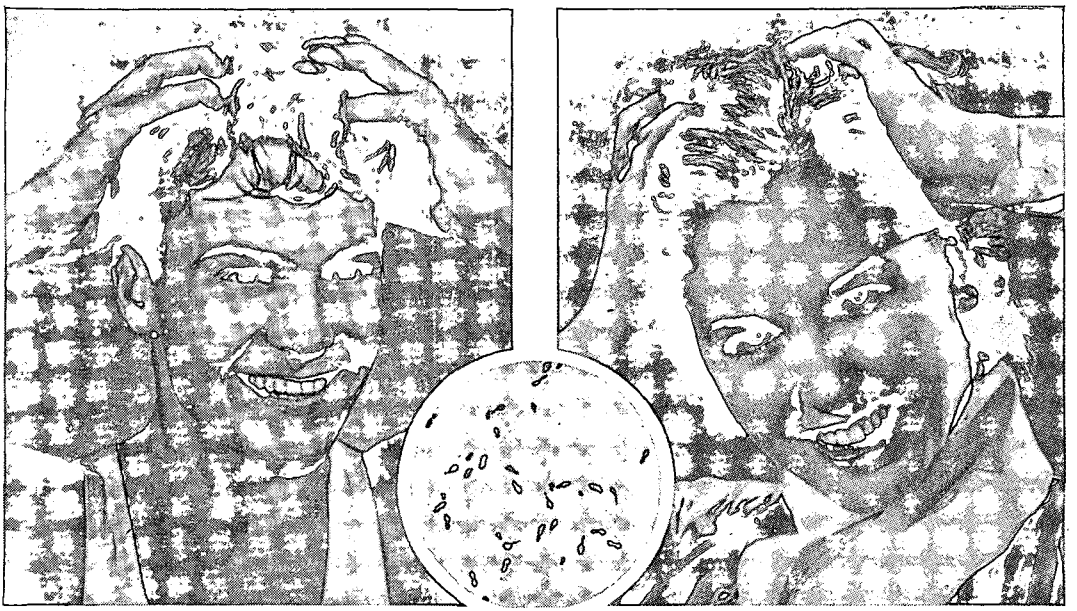

Pityrosporum ovale, the strange "bottle bacillus" regarded by many leading authorities as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

EVERY WEEK WHEN YOU WASH YOUR HAIR,

Listerine to guard against INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF!

When defense work takes so much of your time you're likely to side-track some important things. Well—don't side-track your hair and scalp.

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Listerine Antiseptic kills millions of germs on your scalp and hair, including Pityrosporum ovale, the strange "bottle bacillus" that many authorities consider a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

At the same time it gives your scalp a feeling of freshness and invigoration.

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WS—1E

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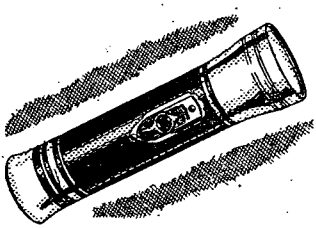
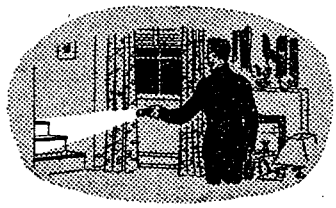
WHEN and HOW to Use Your FLASHLIGHT in a BLACKOUT

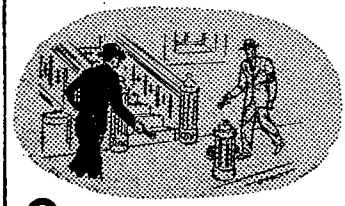
THESE INSTRUCTIONS Reviewed and Passed by the OFFICE OF CIVILIAN DEFENSE



1 EVERY HOME should have one or more flashlights! But before buying *new* ones, inspect and repair your *old* ones. They may need only a new bulb, new lens or fresh batteries.



2 KEEP YOUR FLASHLIGHT in a convenient, accessible place —and *always* in its place. When using it INDOORS, never point it toward unshielded windows, skylights or open doors.



3 DO NOT USE an *unshielded* flashlight OUTDOORS in a blackout except when absolutely necessary. Keep the beam level or downward—never point it even *slightly* upward. And never point it toward highly reflective surfaces.

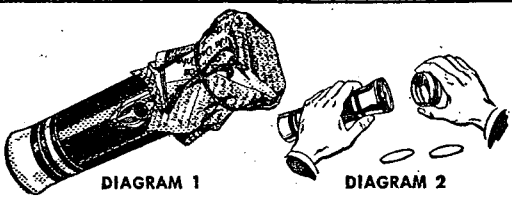


DIAGRAM 1 DIAGRAM 2

4 HERE'S HOW TO SHIELD your flashlight for outdoor use: Cover lens with two thicknesses of newspaper or similar paper, held in place by string, as in Diagram 1. OR, cut two discs of paper and insert under lens, as in Diagram 2. Deep red paper may also be used (blue is unsatisfactory). **CAUTION: The Office of Civilian Defense has not yet approved any so-called "blackout lights."** To be safe, follow the instructions given here, *until further instructions are issued.*

KEEP FLASHLIGHTS LOADED with fresh batteries, and have an extra set on hand for your light in case of long-continued use.

THE FOREGOING INSTRUCTIONS ARE PUBLISHED FOR YOUR AID AND GUIDANCE

We hope you will never meet with an emergency, but if you do, we hope you will have *fresh* "Eveready" batteries in your flashlight, because we know they will not fail you. Fresh, DATED "Eveready" batteries last longer.

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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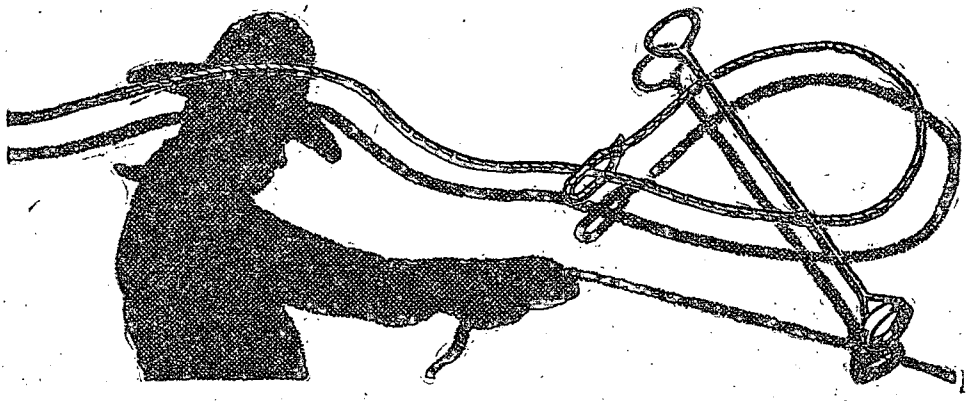

The Roundup

Our mail contains a heap that's interesting, and a heap that's helpful. It contains criticism, of both favorable and unfavorable brands, and the unfavorable is just as useful as the favorable. We realize that those who cut loose at us often do so to lend us a helping hand.

Letters from our readers tell us which writers are most popular, for instance, the good word received from Lue Moncravie out in Arkansas City, Kansas. He writes:

"I am an old-time reader of Western stories of all kinds, and I must say that your Western Story magazine is splendid. As an example, let's take a look at the February 14th issue of this year. Ney N. Geer's story, PASEAR TO TEXAS, is swell, every word of it—come again. Also the continued story, SON OF STORM KING, by Kenneth Gilbert. That's a real yarn, and I particularly liked the poem, VAQUERO'S VALENTINE, by S. Omar Barker. I feel that I should let these writers know how much I enjoyed them. In fact, the whole magazine can't be beat."

Thanks, Lue. You can count on us to remember that you like these writers. It will interest you—as well as the countless other Geer fans—to know that we've just bought another of the matchless Potluck Jones and Too-bad Tommy yarns—and it's a honey! And there's a new serial by Ken Gilbert in the writing this very minute. We'll have more of Omar Barker, too, from time to time. And you're not alone in thinking this hombre writes top-hand Western verse.

Coming next week—PAYOFF AT RATTLESNAKE SPRINGS, a smashing full-length novel by Seth Ranger, brings you the excitement-packed story of Spruce Renfro who discovered that ramrodding a salty haywire outfit involved the job of taming a treacherous range baron's string of trigger-proddy tough hands; a full cavvy of outstanding cow-country short stories and features by Rod Patterson, Harry F. Olmsted, Eric Howard, Harry Sinclair Drago, S. Omar Barker, Carl Raht, and other top authors, plus the usual line-up of departments and interesting fact articles about the West.

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I TRAINED THESE MEN

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WHY MANY RADIO TECHNICIANS MAKE $30, $40, $50, A WEEK

The Radio repair business is booming as manufacturers have stopped making new sets, and the country's 57,400,000 home and auto sets are becoming older, needing more repairs, new tubes, parts. This is opening new opportunities for full time and *part time Radio Technicians* to get good jobs, or to open their own Radio repair businesses. Radio Technicians and Operators hold good jobs *in the country's 882 Broadcasting* Stations and in Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine and Government Radio. Loud Speaker Systems give good *jobs to many. The Government* is calling for Civilian Radio Technicians and Operators. Government orders for millions of dollars worth of Radio equipment offer opportunities in Radio factories. Men with Radio Training are in line for extra rank and pay in the Army and Navy. Many Radio developments such as Television, held back by the war, will make Radio a live-wire field for the future.

BEGINNERS SOON LEARN TO EARN $5, $10 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME

Due to the boom in the Radio repair business, practically every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for conducting experiments and building test equipment to *help you do better, faster Radio repair work.* My 50-50 method—half working, with Radio parts I send you, half studying lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, gives you valuable practical experience.

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J. E. SMITH, President,
Dept. 2GD
National Radio Institute,
Washington, D. C.

$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my *tenth lesson.* I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time.

JOHN JERRY
1729 Penn St.
Denver, Colorado

Radio Technician at Ordnance Works

I am now Chief Radio Man at ——— Ordnance Works and very pleased with my new position. If I had not taken the N. R. I. Course I might be digging ditches, or perhaps unemployed.

R. S. LEWIS
(Address omitted for *military reasons.*)

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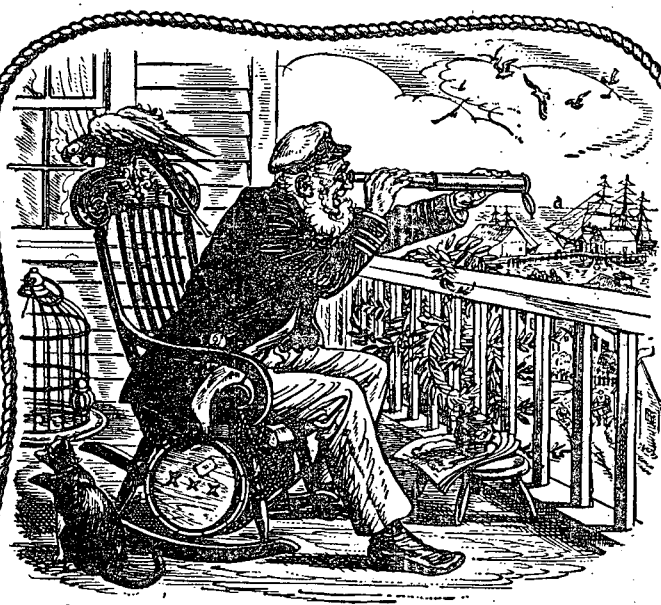
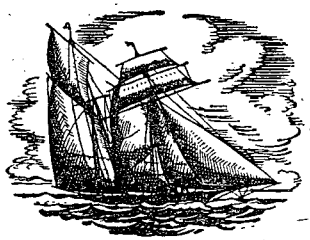


Capt. Turnbull (1806-1900) — like other old salts of his day — rocked a keg of whiskey under his rocker. Its roll recaptured the motion of the wave-tossed ships on which he'd mellowed many a barrel of whiskey.

From Mellow Whiskeys "Rocked in the Keg" came the Idea for Rocking Chair!



Mr. Boston knows *rocking* mellows a whiskey's flavor. So he achieves Rocking Chair's richness by *controlled agitation in his special blending process.*

Get acquainted with Rocking Chair's smoothness! Buy a bottle—enjoy the mellow taste that made keg-rocked whiskeys so famous. The price is *low!*

85 Proof (80 Proof in some States)
75% Grain Neutral Spirits
Ben-Burk, Inc., Boston, Mass.

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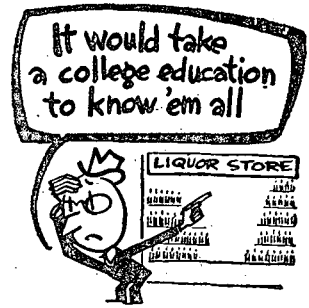
BRAND
ROCKING CHAIR
BLENDED WHISKEY



I Went Nuts in Liquor Stores
— by don herold

I used to go crazy in liquor stores, trying to decide which brand to buy. So many brands! The confusion is terrific for the layman liquor layer-inner.

Then a friend told me his system. He said "I've settled on Old Mr. Boston as MY brand —no matter what type of fine liquor I want."

Me—I have too, now.

It turns out that Old Mr. Boston is the one brand name under which you can buy almost every known type of fine liquor. Other big companies make many liquors, but they give them many different names. It's baffling! It's befuddling!

In the Old Mr. Boston li[illegible] can buy 30 different liqu[illegible] under the one name, and a[illegible] on the palate and pocketbo[illegible]

You know Boston. And you know its fine old reputation for craftsmanship. Well, you can smack a taste of the old town's 300-year-old reputation for quality in every drop of every Mr. Boston product.

So why not try the Old Mr. Herold plan and use Old Mr. Boston "as a handle by which to call your shots" when you want fine liquors?

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PART ONE

Rainbow found his pard battling it out with a bushwhacker, and he knew treachery was riding close on their back trail.

PARDNERS OF THE BADLANDS

by Harry Sinclair Drago

CHAPTER I

GRUMPY SMELLS TROUBLE

"WAAL, tie me down if that ain't somethin'!" Grumpy Gibbs declared with a loud snort of disgust as he viewed the preparations going forward here on the bank of the Green River. Half a mile below the little Wyoming town of Black Forks, the Thaddeus Hammersley Expedition was outfitting for its well-publicized attempt to run the canyons of the Green and the Colorado. The little man's tone had never been crustier. "I've chased outlaws and rustlers

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and slapped down the ears of more'n one killer in my time, but I'll be hornswoggled if I'm fool enough to want any of this dish! Look at them boats! Flat as punkin seeds! They're too big and too wide to git through rapids like they'll find down in the Canyon of Lodore or Desolation. Why, Rainbow, they won't be fit for kindlin' wood by the time they hit the Gunnison Valley!"

A smile touched Rainbow Ripley's lean, bronzed face. Differences of opinion between his partner and himself were too common to cause him any concern. They had traveled too far and been through too much gun smoke together for that. In the present instance, Rainbow knew that the little man was only blowing off steam that he had been storing up for several weeks.

Rainbow had received a letter from Professor Thaddeus Hammersley, in New York City, seeking to engage their services for the long and hazardous voyage down the mighty Colorado. The idea had appealed to Ripley, but Grumpy had raised a score of objections.

"Don't agitate yourself; we're just looking," Rainbow told his partner. They had ridden down from Judge Carver's ranch where they had been taking things easy for a month. "You can see that Hammersley isn't going about this in any two-by-four way. He's got a dozen men here already, and the party from New York, the scientists and photographers, won't be showing up for another week."

"Yeah," Grumpy grumbled. "He's got enough stuff here to outfit an army. D'yuh mean to tell me he's goin' to cart all them boxes and bales of grub and instruments through stretches of bad water like Hell's Half Mile? An' what's he need 'em for?"

"He expects to lose some boats, I suppose. That's been the story with every party that has tried to run the canyons. You know how it was with the Bancroft Expedition. They had all their grub in one boat. It was smashed up in Disaster Falls. They starved to death—all but one who crawled out to the old Uinta Agency."

"And you still want a helpin' of this dish?" Grumpy growled. He shook his head violently. "Not for me! Ain't nuthin' for this Hammersley to discover. Major Powell did that thirty years ago. Took all the pitchers and learned all there is to know. There ain't no sense in doin' it all over again jest to be able to brag that you did it. An' takin' wimmen along! Two of 'em, you say?"

"Yeah. Miss Thane, Hammersley's ward, and a Miss Wattress, the painter. You read the letter."

"The man's mad!" Grumpy insisted stubbornly. "I don't claim to know these rivers, but I've seen 'em from the cliffs and I know what they can do to you. When this bunch gits through the Flamin' Gorge, there won't be no turnin' back. They'll have to go on, the whether they like it or not. B that don't mean we got to invi ourselves along. We'd have one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel before we'd gone ten miles!"

GRUMPY'S vehemence sounded familiar enough, but Rainbow caught an undercurrent that swung him around in his saddle. Though he was the younger of the two by ten years, he never failed to remind himself that a great measure of the success they had enjoyed as stock and range detectives was due to the doughty little man's loyalty, cour-

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age and stubborn, unbending will. After a long glance at that grizzled, hard-bitten face, he said: "I thought you were just blowing off, but you mean this, don't you?"

"I shore do!" was the flinty answer. "I read about Hammersley goin' to look for mineral deposits and that daughter of his, or whatever she is, takin' pitchers in natural colors, but it don't mean nuthin' to me. We're range detectives, not a couple of water rats. I tell you, I've seen these canyons all the way from the Flamin' Gorge down to Robbers' Roost, an' I ain't got no hankerin' to see any more of 'em. Git into trouble and there ain't no one to help you—not even Injuns. You're cut off from everythin'. There ain't more'n four or five places between here and Lee's Ferry where you kin crawl out, and you ain't got no place when you do."

Fifty yards downstream two of the men ran one of the shallow, wide-beamed boats into the river and deliberately upset it. The strange-looking craft bobbed to the surface immediately and, when it was easily righted, appeared as buoyant as ever. The men then tried to sink the boat, but it refused to stay down.

"Waal, that's shore purty good," Grumpy acknowledged grudgingly. "Those boats will pack a load."

"Air-tight compartments," Rainbow told him. "These men Hammersley's got to handle them seem to know their business. The judge told me he'd heard some of them were from Alaska."

"They're a tough-looking bunch, if you ask me," growled the little man. "If any of 'em are from Alaska, I bet they left in a hurry, for one reason or another."

Rainbow laughed. "Suppose we talk to 'em."

Without waiting for Grumpy's answer he kneed his horse and moved down the bank toward the tents. The little man followed, growling to himself. When they were within a few feet of the piles of boxes and crates, an armed man suddenly stepped out and ordered them to turn back.

"We ain't askin' for visitors," he said gruffly, "and I ain't tellin' yuh twicet." He tapped the rifle he carried over his arm significantly.

Rainbow's lips tightened at this unwarranted hostility. "That's putting it up to us a little rough, ain't it?" he queried, searching the face before him. It seemed to be all slitted eyes and chin. "Have you got something here to hide?"

"Naw, we ain't got nuthin' to hide," was the surly answer, "but we gotta lot of equipment spread around here and we ain't takin' no chance of it turnin' up missin'."

SEVERAL of the other men ran up, their attitude equally threatening. Rainbow had to agree with Grumpy that they were a tough-looking bunch.

"What's the matter, Ginger?" one growled. "Are these gents givin' you an argyment?"

"I'm wonderin' about that," the man with the long chin sneered, balancing his rifle lightly in the crook of his arm.

"If it's an argyment yo're lookin' for it's right under yore nose, mister," Grumpy burst out. This business had got under his skin, and he pushed forward, mad as a hornet. "We ain't got no fault to find with bein' told to turn back and keep out, but I'm danged if we're goin' to be treated like a couple of hoss thieves. I'll have you know there's a chance we may be goin' down the canyons with this party. I'm Gibbs,

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and this is my pardner, Rainbow Ripley."

The men exchanged a quick glance, but Grumpy's attention remained fixed on Ginger. Something in the depths of the latter's narrowed eyes told him the names were not unknown to the man.

"You may be all right, but I don't know you from Adam," Ginger said flatly. "An' I ain't had no instructions to be on the lookout for you. If yo're friends of the perfessor's, you'll have to show me some papers."

"Let him take a look at them letters from Hammersley," Grumpy told his companion.

"No, we won't bother with that," said Rainbow. "We'll wait until Hammersley shows up. We'll be at the hotel in Black Forks if anyone wants to find us."

Swinging his horse around, he started for town. Grumpy let fly a last retort and then took after Rainbow, wondering if a slug in the back might not stop the two of them before they got very far.

"Say, what was the idee lettin' me down thataway?" he demanded fiercely when he came abreast of Rainbow. "We could've made that gent eat his flip talk!"

Ripley shook his head. "I'm afraid not. We didn't have anything for him to chew on. Those letters are in my room, up at the ranch. But speaking of ideas, what was that crack you made about there being a chance of our going along with that outfit?"

"Talk! Jest talk!" Grumpy snorted. "You know dang well I was only tryin' to make that gent hunt his hole! Laugh if you want to! I may give you one that'll split yore sides when we hit town."

They were in Black Forks a few minutes later.

"Hold on!" the little man exclaimed as Rainbow headed for the hotel. "I wanta drop into the sheriff's office for a minute. You come along."

They found Sheriff Rod Effingham preparing to go home for supper when they walked in.

"Heard you was in town," the lawman greeted them. "Somethin' on your minds?"

"Rod, do you keep yore old 'Wanted Men' notices?" Grumpy asked.

"Shore! Got a stack of 'em filed away. You want to run through 'em?"

"If you don't mind. Git 'em out and then run along. We'll just sit here a few minutes, if it's all right with you."

FOR a quarter of an hour Grumpy ran over the old handbills before a sharp grunt of satisfaction escaped him. "Jest as I thought!" he exclaimed. "Lissen to this: 'William—alias Ginger—Revell. Wanted in connection with robbery of Great Northern train at Scott's Station, Montana.' Now take a look at that face! There's our friend with the big chin!"

Across the bottom of the notice Rod had penciled: "Two years Montana pen."

"He ain't been out long," Rainbow observed soberly. "I wondered if you recognized him."

"Huh?" Grumpy demanded with a crestfallen air. "You mean to say you knew?"

"It's pretty hard to forget a face like that. Wasn't it your idea that Revell could have told us something about that case we were on up in the Judith Basin, four years ago, if we could have caught up with him?"

Grumpy could only shake his puzzled head. "Rainbow, why would

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a crook like Ginger Revell git himself mixed up with this Hammersley Expedition? What does it mean?"

"I don't know, but if the good doctor has any more like Revell in that bunch he better have someone along to look out for him."

"Mebbe he had," growled Grumpy, "but that don't mean it's got to be us!"

"No," Rainbow admitted, leading the way across the street to the hotel.

He found a telegram there for him.

"Waal?" the little man demanded uneasily as Ripley read the message. "Who's it from? Hammersley?"

"It's from Tom Moran, the general manager of the Rocky Mountain Shortline. He wants us to meet him at the railroad offices in Platte City, Colorado, on Wednesday. Important, he says."

A wide grin spread over Grumpy's weather-beaten face. "Waal!" he declared with relief. "That sounds like a job! Our kind of a job! You'll go, of course?"

"I'll have to go." Rainbow could not hold back a grin as he saw Grumpy perk up. "Tom Moran has come through for us too many times to let him down. I don't know what he wants, but it won't do any harm to hear what he's got to say."

"Now yo're talkin', by gravy! If we're goin' to be in Platte City on Wednesday, Rainbow, we gotta grab the train east in Green River tonight. That'll jest give us time to git supper here and make tracks."

The little man was actually garrulous as they ate. That was usually the case when his spirits were riding high. On the way north to Green River, however, he fell silent and had nothing to say for miles.

"What's the matter with you?" Rainbow demanded finally. "You've closed up like a clam."

"Rainbow, I bin thinkin'. Hammersley don't know he's got a crook like Revell, an' mebbe others, workin' for him, does he?"

"Well, hardly—"

"Then why has he bin offerin' us a job? What's he want us for? If it ain't pertection he's thinkin' of, then what is it? Jest how was we to be of any use to him?"

Rainbow slowed his horse to a walk and stared at the little man without knowing how to answer. "I don't know," he admitted frankly. "I never thought of it that way. Hammersley is a rich man. I don't suppose the money he'd be paying us would mean anything to him, but I can't tell you why he wants us."

Grumpy nodded to himself grimly. "It might not be a bad idea to find out," he muttered. "This thing don't smell right to me!"

CHAPTER II

TICKETS FOR HELL

ACROSS the continent in New York City a conference was taking place that pleasant April evening in the home of Professor Thaddeus Hammersley, in Gramercy Park South. The conversation would have thoroughly enlightened Grumpy Gibbs had he been able to put an ear to it.

Though the residents of that quiet and delightful section of the great city had no closer acquaintance with Thaddeus Hammersley than they were able to gain from reading from time to time of his explorations and adventures in various parts of the world, they accepted him as an illustrious neighbor and had long since ceased to remark on his unexpected comings and goings, always in the close company of a stocky, unsmil-

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ing Japanese who was reported to be his secretary and assistant.

When Professor Hammersley was in residence, his visitors were not infrequent, and as might have been expected, they were often of a type to quicken and excite the imagination. The rocky-faced, hard-jawed man with whom Hammersley was seated in his study this evening was no exception. By the cut of his clothes he was a Westerner and, judging from the air of authority he gave himself, a person of some consequence, in his own mind at least. Across his heavily carved desk Hammersley regarded him approvingly.

"You have carried out my instructions to the letter," he said. "I knew I had not made any mistake in selecting you for this . . . er . . . shall we say . . . enterprise?"

"I've gathered a bunch of men out there who know their way around," the other replied. "Boat or saddle is all the same to them. You'll find them handy enough with their guns and fists. The law's had grudges against most of them, but you said that didn't matter—"

"Not at all, Brant!" Hammersley assured him: "I need desperate men who'll see this through no matter what it costs. This will not be the first time I've done what others said was impossible. As I told you when I last saw you in Cheyenne, I've worked out every detail of this undertaking as carefully as though it were a scientific problem." He smiled. "I don't mind telling you I have found it far more interesting than such dry stuff as that. With the proper assistance from you, I can't fail!"

His piercing black eyes had begun to burn so brightly that the rest of his face seemed to be only a dead mask. It was a peculiarity that Samson Brant had noticed before, and he caught himself wondering if Hammersley were really sane. His glance ran over this magnificently appointed room, with its case on case of rare specimens and beautifully carved jade and ivory, souvenirs from the four corners of the earth. To Brant it seemed a strange setting in which to be discussing a crime of such magnitude and daring that his own past criminal activities faded into insignificance, but it was at once a hundredfold more incredible and fantastic to realize that Thaddeus Hammersley, the rich, world-famous scientist of sterling reputation, was the master mind of the scheme; that for months he had devoted himself to its accomplishment with an open purse and all the vigor and Machiavellian shrewdness of his fifty-odd years.

"IT is a very interesting room," Hammersley broke in on Brant's musing with a thin edge of sarcasm. "I should be delighted to show it to you sometime. But we were speaking of the co-operation I am to expect from you, Brant—"

"You had your answer to that some months back," his visitor said sullenly. "You left me no choice."

"Exactly," the professor declared without raising his voice. "I'm glad you understood me. I don't expect any loyalty from you beyond what I can purchase, and I mean purchase with money and threat of exposure. But you are no fool, Brant; it will pay you well to carry out my orders without question. Your fake irrigation schemes and mining ventures haven't netted you anything. Principally because you are inclined to be too greedy. In the four months I was in Montana last fall I saw enough of you and your scheming to understand your limitations. The

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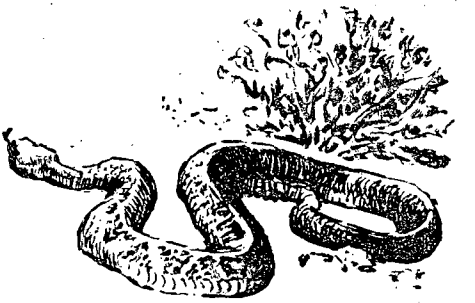
only reason you escaped going to prison for that last fiasco was my deciding not to testify against you—"

"Do we have to go into that again?" Brant demanded with a show of anger. "I haven't gone this far with you to back out now. I'll stick till this job is done, but you might as well understand right now that I'm not going all the way down the river with you. This man Utah Jim McBride, who I've hired to guide us, claims he's been down the Green and Colorado as far as the Granite Gorge. It's his opinion that we'll be mighty lucky to get the boats, with all that beam, through Lodore. I know why the boats had to be wide, but I'm not going to risk my neck in them for nothing. McBride says if we try Marble Canyon or Granite Gorge we'll never come out alive."

"He's right," Hammersley said without hesitation. He got up and walked to a window overlooking the park. He was an immensely tall man. With his bushy gray hair and hawklike nose, he was an arresting figure. He turned to Brant suddenly. "I think I can safely predict that the Hammersley Expedition will be a complete fiasco as far as reaching the Colorado is concerned. Our work will have been accomplished long before then. The rest will be just a matter of continuing until no suspicion can attach to us. I predict a series of minor misfortunes that will end in abandonment of the undertaking."

"That means throwing away between eight to ten thousand dollars in wages and equipment." Brant could only shake his head admiringly at the cold-blooded audacity of the man. "There must be a better way."

"There *is* no other way!" Professor Hammersley said with flat finality. "A million dollars' worth of raw silk rolling across this country on an average of once a month, and it's never been molested. And only because until now no one has been able to conceive of any way of making off with even part of it!" His eyes were burning again and unconsciously he raised his voice. "Raw silk, hard to identify! As salable as government bonds! We're playing for a big stake, Mr. Brant! My investment is nothing!"



THE door opened quietly and Saburo Itchi, the Japanese, stepped into the room. Brant gave a warning cough.

"We have no secrets from Itchi," Hammersley told him. "As we go along you will discover that the success of our plans will depend in no little degree on his contribution. Nevertheless you will address him as just my secretary. Itchi, this is Samson Brant. You will remember him from Montana."

"Yes, I identified him by the smell of his cigar." The Japanese turned a pair of blank, inscrutable eyes, that never gave any hint of what he was thinking, to Brant. "I have been going over your expense account, Mr. Brant. There is an item that puzzles me: One hundred dollars for 'sugar.'"

"I got a man I wanted out of the

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jug. Gass Labelle, if you want his name. We can use him." Brant's mouth took on a harder angle. "Why?" he whipped out. "Is there any question about it?"

Little Saburo Itchi met the query with an expressionless yellow face. "No," he murmured. "If he is a good man I would say you got a bargain. You will excuse me, please."

Bowing to Professor Hammersley, Itchi crossed the study to his office. Through the open door he could follow the conversation in the next room. This role of secretary and humble assistant which he was satisfied to play, though his achievements in science rated him as the equal of men whose names were famous, was not the usual case of Japanese duplicity biding its time. In the nine years since Itchi had accompanied Thaddeus Hammersley into the deserts of Outer Mongolia he had learned how to give himself such perfect expression through the mind of the other that he had fallen a victim to his own experiment and come completely under the older man's spell.

"What about these other people you're taking along?" Brant was asking. "What are we to do with them?"

In his office Itchi shook his head. "Such an irrelevant question. He has the mind of a child," he said softly to himself.

"I shall find a way to separate the sheep from the goats," Professor Hammersley answered with a mirthless laugh. "The mouth of the Yampa River might be an excellent place. We'll be camped there overnight."

"But this ward of yours—Miss Thane?" persisted Brant.

The professor had come back to his desk. He leaned back in his chair and gave the man a long, cold glance. "Miss Thane is a very courageous young woman," he said softly. "Suppose you leave her to me. I don't believe in becoming emotional about these things."

"I see you don't!" Grant whipped out. "There's something about you that's beginning to give me the creeps. You can't murder half a dozen people in those canyons or anywhere else and get away with it."

"We will have trouble with that man before we are through," the listening Itchi told himself. "We shall very likely have to dispose of him, also—quietly."

"'Murder' is a very unpleasant-sounding word, Brant," the professor remarked. "I wasn't considering anything so crude and unnecessary. But accidents are not uncommon on such a trip. I think you understand me."

"Yeah!" Brant dropped his water-logged cigar into an ash tray and sat there meeting Hammersley's piercing regard without flinching. "That's a game two can play at, professor. Don't let your accidents include me. I'm willing to take a little pushing around now because there's nothing I can do about it. But the minute we lay hands on that train there won't be any more of this pot-calling-the-kettle-black business. I'll have too much on you for that. I advise you and your friend Mr. Itchi to remember it."

HAMMERSLEY pretended to take it lightly. "That's a very interesting observation, and true, of course." He examined his carefully tended nails for a moment. "Fortunately our need of each other will preclude any treachery. I'll make sure of that, and I know you will do the same."

"All right," Brant muttered. "Just so we understand each other. If

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there's nothing more to be talked over, I'll go back to the hotel."

"There's the little matter of the law," said the professor. "An army of United States marshals, sheriffs and railroad detectives will take the trail a few hours after the news breaks. I don't expect suspicion to be directed to us, but I haven't stopped there. You've heard, I daresay, of Rainbow Ripley and Gibbs, his partner."

Brant's head came up sharply. "The range detectives? What about them?"

"I've written Ripley several letters offering to meet his own terms if he and Gibbs will accompany us—"

"Are you crazy?" Samson Brant cried, leaping to his feet. "That's just the same as asking for twenty years in Leavenworth! You can't pull the wool over their eyes! That pair is too smart!"

"That's precisely why I want them with us, Brant. Having them along will be killing two birds with one stone. It will not only make it impossible for the Rocky Mountain Shortline to hire them, but their very presence with us will mean a clean bill of health with the law. Depend on it that I'll arrange things so that they see and hear nothing."

"Now I know you're mad!" raged Brant. "Of all the preposterous things I ever heard of, this takes the cake!" He banged the desk with his huge fist and was catching his breath for a fresh outburst when Itchi hurried into the room.

"Gentlemen, Hendricks, the butler, is at the door," he warned. And to the professor: "I believe Miss Thane has just returned."

"All right," Hammersley murmured. "Tell Hendricks to show her in. She'll enjoy meeting our visitor. You will find my ward deeply interested in the expedition, Brant."

The rocky-faced man straightened his tie and produced a fresh cigar. He bit off the end with a savage clashing of teeth. "There's no fool like an educated one, Hammersley! You'll wish you had more horse sense and less brains if you stick to your plan of taking that pair with us!"

"I'm sure it will work out," the other said. His hearty laugh was meant for the pretty, dark-haired girl who had just stepped into the room rather than for the big man across the desk. "Here is Miss Thane now!" He got to his feet and advanced to meet her. "I was hoping you would be home early, Karen. I have a little surprise for you. This is Mr. Samson Brant, the mining expert, who has been arranging things for us in the West. Mr. Brant, this is my ward, Miss Karen Thane."

"Mr. Brant!" Karen exclaimed, her voice warm with interest. "Uncle has spoken of you so often. He tells me we are to leave a week from tomorrow."

Brant nodded. "You'll find everything ready for you when you arrive. The boats came the day before I left and I had them put into the water at once. The river is still high, but another ten days should take care of that."

"I'm so anxious to be out there," Karen told him. "I know the canyons are beautiful even in black and white. It's quite thrilling to be the first person to photograph them in color."

KAREN had many questions to ask. Brant answered them as best he could, with a word now and then from the professor. By all the moral standards, Samson Brant was

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a crook and a blackleg, but the fresh young loveliness of this girl touched some forgotten streak of decency in him, and, knowing what lay ahead of her, he had to drive himself to meet her eyes. When Hammersley said, "I'm afraid we've kept Mr. Brant long enough; he was about to leave when you came in," Brant fell in with the suggestion gladly and made his escape. The professor walked to the door with him and made an appointment for the following morning.

When Hammersley returned to the study, he found the Japanese awaiting him.

"The man is a fool, doctor," said Itchi. "He will prove most difficult."

"There are no ideal accomplices, Itchi," Hammersley murmured, gathering up some papers. "Brant has a certain amount of animal courage and caution that will be useful to us. We shall permit him to have his way—or pretend to—until we have no further need of him."

"By then he will be really dangerous. It will be necessary to remove him—permanently."

"Naturally." The professor glanced at the clock. "Almost nine. We shall have to be leaving. I promised Jim Darwin I would be present to hear him read his paper on the prehistoric mammalia of the Southwest this evening."

Itchi bowed. "We shall go at once. By the way, doctor, you were not impressed by what Brant had to say regarding the two detectives—Rainbow Ripley and Gibbs?"

"Impressed?" Hammersley rasped. "From the first I realized how dangerous those men might be to our plans. I didn't need Brant to tell me. Because they are so dangerous is the best reason in the world why we should have them where we can watch them."

"An excellent theory," the Japanese agreed. "But some unforeseen circumstance beyond our control might arouse their suspicions—"

"We shall know how to deal with them in any case, my friend! We are not fettered by the frustrations and inhibitions of the emotion-weakened criminal mind." He quoted an ancient law of the East: "'Your death is my life.' We shall remember it no matter who gets in our way."

Professor Hammersley was once again only giving voice to the other's unexpressed will. Itchi was not completely satisfied, however. "A trifling mistake, doctor, would spell disaster—"

"Disaster for them!" Hammersley's tone was cold and stony. "Immediate disaster!"

"Of course," murmured Itchi, his high cheekbones casting a ghastly shadow across his yellow face as he bent down and switched off the desk lamp. "Dr. Darwin's paper should be very interesting."

CHAPTER III

WOLVES OF ANOTHER BRAND

NO. 3 was over an hour late when she rolled into Platte City on Wednesday evening. Tom Moran, the general manager of the road, hurried over to the division offices at once. He found Rainbow and Grumpy waiting for him. They had been in town since noon.

"I'm glad you stuck around," said Moran, shaking hands with them. "I expected to be here this morning, but I got held up at the last minute as I was leaving Denver. Pat Garner, our chief of detectives, came in with me. He'll be over as soon as he grabs a bite to eat. You boys

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had your supper?"

"Two hours ago," Rainbow told him.

"Good! We can sit here and talk then. You fixed so you can handle a job?"

"Yep," Grumpy answered at once. "Jest waitin' for somethin' to turn up."

"You're pretty quick on the trigger with that," observed Rainbow. "Suppose you let me put in a word. We've had a job offered us, Tom: this Hammersley Expedition that's going down the Colorado. It appeals to me; I'd like to take it. The rest of the firm is dead set against it, though."

"You haven't made a deal yet?"

"No—"

"Good!" Moran exclaimed. "I think I've got something just as interesting that will be more in your line. I suppose you know we're hauling the Silk Express across the mountains from Ogden to Denver?"

"I've heard you were. You haven't had any trouble?"

"No—and I don't want to have any. She's been running blind, stopping only for water. Pat always has armed guards aboard. But I don't mind telling you I'm in a sweat from the minute we pick her up until we turn her over in Denver. Only the chief dispatcher's office and a few top men know when she's coming through, but I don't care how closely you guard a secret like that, there's bound to be leaks. I've been a railroad man long enough to know it. Raw silk runs into money, Rainbow. Six, seven, sometimes eight cars. It don't miss the million-dollar mark by much. I know if anyone was interested they could spot the train in the yards at Ogden and telegraph ahead."

"I don't believe you have very much to worry about," Rainbow declared. "Silk is bulky. You can't stuff it into a gunny sack and make off with it. I don't know how many years these silk expresses have been going East. Three or four roads have hauled them and never had any trouble. I never heard that any attempt had been made to stick one up."

"That's a record I want to see continued," Moran said with a nervous chuckle. "Take a look at that map. Get west of here ten miles and you've got some mighty lonely country ahead of you all the way across Green River and through the Uintas. I get the shivers when I remember what it used to be. It was the worst outlaw-infested corner of the United States. Brown's Park, old Vernal—and all the way down to Moab and Robbers' Roost in the land of the yellow bluffs!"

"Shucks, Tom," Grumpy scoffed, "you're goin' back to the days of the Wild Bunch and the Hole-in-the-wall gang. Them old-timers was all cleaned out or killed off."

"I'm not so sure a new crowd hasn't grown up to take their place," Moran said soberly.

PAT GARNER had come in while Moran was talking. "That's right!" he declared. "There must be a score of men with records on the loose over there. I don't have to tell you boys that it's still a lawless country. In the last six months I've seen men like Wild Bill Walsh, Ben Ruby and Blue Morgan come out of the Canyon City pen and disappear in a day or two. It's my opinion they lost no time in heading back for their stamping ground around old Fort Duchesne, or somewhere across the line in Utah."

"Where's all this leading to?" asked Rainbow. "Where do we fit into it?"

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"I want you to drift through that country on both sides of the river and get a line on who's around," Moran replied. "If it takes you a month, all right. The information will be worth what it costs."

"It sounds all right to me," Grumpy spoke up as he saw his partner start to shake his head. He glared at Rainbow wrathfully. "What do you find wrong with it?"

"Not a thing," Rainbow replied. "I'd like it fine. But I'm going to say no."

"If it's a matter of money—" Moran picked up.

"Money hasn't anything to do with it, Tom. If you were in a spot and needed help, you know what my answer would be, but if it isn't anything more serious than this, I wish you'd get someone else. I want to have a fling at that Colorado River expedition. I can't tell you why; I've just got a funny feeling about it."

"By gravy, I got a feelin' about it, too!" Grumpy exploded. "If you go, you go alone!"

If he stopped abruptly it was only because a clerk from the chief dispatcher's office ran in with a sheet of yellow tissue for Moran. The latter sucked in his breath sharply as he read the brief message. His smothered curse said that the news was bad.

"What is it, Tom?" Pat Garner demanded anxiously.

"A freight train piled up two miles west of Split Mountain! Track blocked! Engine and a couple cars in the ditch!" Moran grabbed the speaking tube that connected him with the division superintendent's office downstairs. "Matt!" he barked. "119 is in the ditch west of Split Mountain! Get a crew and wrecker on the way! That track's got to be cleared in a hurry! Let that stuff slide down into the canyon if you have to, and to the devil with it! I'll be down in a minute!"

The chief dispatcher himself ran in now, his face white with excitement. "Mr. Moran, that freight was wrecked! Logs had been piled on the track! I've got the special laid out on the siding in Mormon Valley with a burned-out bearing. 119 was running on her time. Do you realize that but for that burned-out bearing the Silk Express would—"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Moran cried. "So that's what they were after! I told you, Ripley!"

"Wait a minute, Tom!" Rainbow caught the railroad man by the arm as he grabbed his hat and started for the door. "If that offer is still open, we're taking it. But we're here without horses or saddles or any kind of an outfit—"

"Pat, see that they get what they need!" Moran ordered. "Have their horses put aboard the wrecker. You'll have to step on it! We'll be pulling out in twenty minutes!" He ran to the stairs. "I'll see you on the train, boys!" he called back.

"Waal, Rainbow, you finally came to yore senses," Grumpy growled. "Though a mountain had to fall on you first!"

Rainbow faced him with a sober countenance. "Grumpy, make no mistake about it; we're asking for cards in the biggest game we ever sat in. All the chips will be down before we're through with this business."

HALF an hour later they were tearing through the night aboard the hastily assembled wrecking train. Doctors and a nurse had been recruited. A later wire had advised Moran that the fireman of the wrecked train had been killed; others

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of the crew were badly injured.

"I'd be careful not to say anything about the Silk Express in anything I gave out to the newspapers," Rainbow advised as he sat with Grumpy, Moran and Garner in the swaying caboose. "Just put this job down as the work of someone who has a grudge against the railroad."

Moran nodded. "I don't intend to give out anything about the Silk Express for several reasons. This story of yours will do. Not that it will fool the gang that tried to knock her off."

"We don't want them to be fooled," said Rainbow. "They'll know we're not being fooled, either. It'll give them something to think about, and they'll wonder what we're up to."

"We certainly don't want this to happen again," the gray-haired Moran muttered grimly.

"That's what Rainbow is tellin' you, Tom," Grumpy put in. "There ain't no way of slowin' up a bunch of crooks like lettin' 'em know yo're jest as smart—or a little smarter—than they are. There must've been a big bunch of 'em in on this job for 'em to figger they could git away with any quantity of stuff. I ain't no fortuneteller, but if Blue Morgan has been seen anywhere between the Uintas and the San Rafael Swell, he gits my vote. I know that wolf. He don't play 'less he's head man."

In another hour the train was skirting the deep gorge of the Yampa River. A series of tunnels brought it to the Rocky Mountain Shortline's new steel bridge across the Green. Here at the head of Missionary Run the towering, sheer walls of Lodore to the north and Spirit Canyon to the south fell away until the distance between the rim and the surface of the river was barely a hundred feet. The four men stepped out on the rear platform as the train rolled across the bridge. Grumpy made a wry face as he gazed at the reddish-brown flood sweeping along beneath him.

"We're danged well done with that," he muttered.

Rainbow let it pass without comment. But there was a question in his mind, despite his tight-lipped silence. "I hope Grumpy's right," he thought. "But I wonder."

The railroad maintained a tiny office at the western approach to the bridge. The man stationed there was a combination telegrapher and watchman. The messages Moran had received had come from here. The train slowed now.

"Hey, Charlie!" called Moran as he saw the operator running alongside the cars looking for him. "You found out anything?"

"The wire's dead west of here!" the man shouted. "Went out as I was trying to get through to the sheriff in Vernal!"

"Cut, eh?"

"Yeah! Hours ago!"

"Listen," Rainbow broke in as the train ground to a stop. "Put us off here, Tom. We're only a few miles from the wreck. We can find the break, and if you'll give me a set of leg irons and a pair of pliers, I'll repair it. I want to see where the cut was made. It may tell us which way that bunch went."

"All right!" Moran agreed. "Get their horses off, Pat!"

GRUMPY shifted his guns to a handier position as the train pulled away and left him and his partner on the right of way. "What makes you think they cut the wire between the river and Split Mountain, Rainbow?" he asked.

"Only because they knew their trail would be picked up and they

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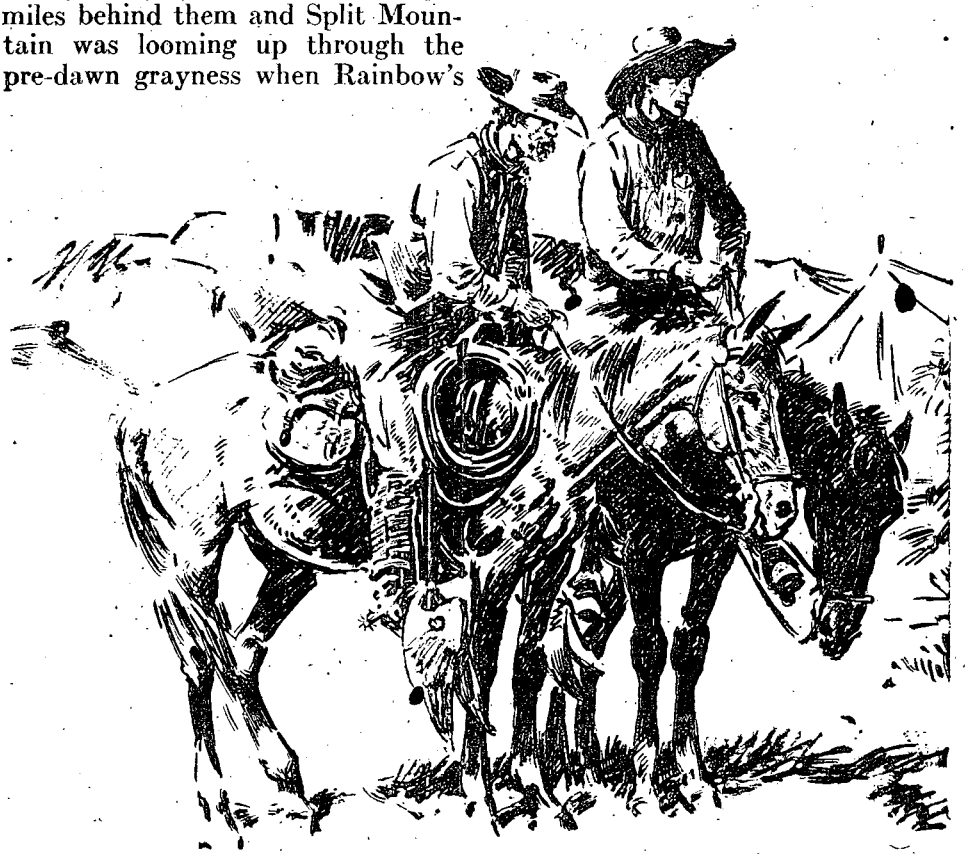
had to break it. I can't think of a better place for that than the Painted Bluffs. That would have sent them this way."

The little man had no fault to find with this logic. Of necessity they had to follow the roadbed. It kept them out in the open where they were easy targets. Grumpy ranged ahead, grimly alert, giving his whole attention to every rock and clump of sagebrush that might conceal a lurking enemy, and leaving it to Rainbow to find the break in the wire.

Though they were forced to move slowly, they had put a good eight miles behind them and Split Mountain was looming up through the pre-dawn grayness when Rainbow's signal announced that he had found the cut. Grumpy swung back to him quickly.

"Waal, looks like you was right!" the gnarled one declared. "Must've been quite a bunch of 'em here. The sage is all tramped down off there to the left. Reckon we can look for 'em in the Painted Bluffs, jest as you said."

"You know we won't find them." Rainbow's gaze lifted to the broken country to the south. "Only a bunch of greenhorns at this game would think of sticking together. If they try it, we can forget about Blue



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Morgan. He's too smart for that. But we'll repair this line and then try to follow their trail."

The light was growing stronger with every passing second. By the time Rainbow climbed down the pole, the repairs finished, the sun was edging up over the horizon. There was still enough moisture in the air to keep the trail ahead of them sharp enough to be followed easily. It led steadily upward to a hard, flinty plateau. They were within a few hundred yards of it when Rainbow flung up a hand and called a halt.

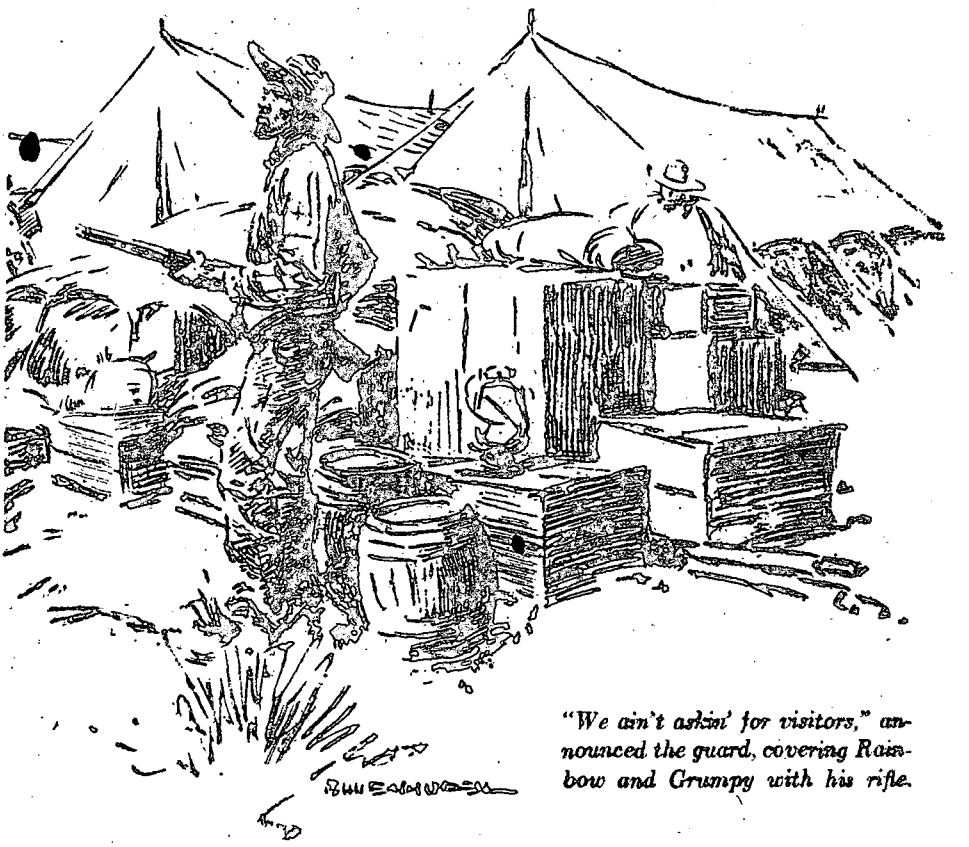
"Take a look at that," he said. "They could have gone on a few minutes until they hit the hardpan and then faded away without our knowing what had become of them. But they parted company here so that a man couldn't miss what they were up to."

"Scattered like a covey of quail!" Grumpy said testily. "Better'n a dozen of 'em, and every last one of the lizards has pulled off by hisself!"

"We can turn back," Rainbow advised. "No use in looking any farther. They're back where they started from by now and telling themselves how smart they are."

"This *was* purty smart," Grumpy averred. "Jest the sort of trick Morgan used to pull when he was hoistin' banks up in Wyomin'."

Rainbow was turning his horse when he caught sight of the lid of a pasteboard box that had been carelessly tossed aside. He rode over and picked it up, and a few moments



"We ain't askin' for visitors," announced the guard, covering Rainbow and Grumpy with his rifle.

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later located the bottom section of the box. It looked so new that he was sure it had not been there long. He read the printed label on the end of the box: "Size 40—Pattern S P 23—Wasatch Woolen Mills, Provo, Utah."

"Shirt box," he told Grumpy. Both were familiar with the heavy woolen shirts turned out by the Wasatch Mills.

"What do you suppose it's doin' up here?" the little man asked.

"I reckon we'll have the answer to that when we see those wrecked freight cars. Chances are there was a shipment of woolen goods on that train, and one of these gents helped himself to a shirt." Rainbow broke off the part of the box on which the label was pasted and placed it in his wallet.

"I'm 'fraid that won't git you very far," Grumpy muttered. "Nine out of ten stores in this country handle them Wasatch shirts."

"I know. That's why this box was thrown away here. It didn't seem to mean anything. The mills change their patterns every few months, though. This may not be worth anything, but I'll take the label along."

WHEN they arrived at the scene of the wreck they found the Uinta County sheriff there with several deputies. The track had been cleared and repaired. The freight engine still lay on its side. The work crew had hold of it with a heavy steel crane and finally got it up so that it settled down on its trucks. Smashed boxes of goods lay scattered around. An assortment of woolen shirts and underwear had spilled out of a packing case, leaving no doubt that Rainbow's surmise had been correct. He and Grumpy spoke with the sheriff and his men for a minute and then went off in search of Moran, convinced that further conversation with these badge toters was a waste of time.

"They're jest over here seein' the sights," the little one rasped. "They won't be any help to us."

Rainbow nodded. "We'll play our own hand. Come on!"

"Just a second, boys," Moran called out on catching sight of them. He had been working as hard as any of his men. "We've got everything clear here. There's a siding about three miles west of the mountain. I'm going to have the wrecker push this stuff back to it so the special can come through. I'll be with you as soon as I give the orders."

He was gone only a few minutes, bringing Garner with him when he returned. The partners had very little to tell them.

"This may be a long trail, Tom," Rainbow warned. "It's dead sure to be a mean one. You won't make it any easier by trying to keep in touch with us."

"Go ahead; you're on your own," Moran told him. "Pat and I will keep out of your way." He took out one of his cards and scrawled a few words on the back of it. "Here, take this. Our agents and conductors will honor it if you happen to need them for any reason." He shook hands with them hurriedly as the engineer gave a warning toot of the whistle. "Luck to you! I know you'll come up with something!"

Grumpy recalled that optimistic parting with caustic misgiving as he rolled into his blankets one evening a week later, down on the Duchesne Fork of the Uinta River. He and Rainbow had covered a lot of territory and knew no more than when they had headed south from the railroad.

"I'm shore glad you told Moran

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not to try to keep a finger on us," he said moodily. "Reckon if he knew how we'd fallen down on the job so far, he'd be wonderin' if he made a mistake in hirin' us."

Rainbow smiled. "I guess not. We've kept on the move pretty well."

"Huh! I'll say we have!" the gnarled little man snorted. "My hunkers is sore from tryin' to find a soft spot in a saddle that don't fit me! When are we gittin' our own gear?"

"We'll start swinging back north in the morning and work out the country close to the river. If something doesn't stop us before we get there, we can go over Ute Pass to Black Forks and out to the ranch."

Rainbow kicked the fire out. Caution was strong in him tonight. He knew their presence in this wild, sparsely settled country had been noted, and that a whisper had run ahead of them on some invisible grapevine telegraph. They had seen some familiar faces and talked with men whose records were bad. There had been others, ranchers and merchants of proven integrity, but they had proven as uncommunicative as those who were open to suspicion. They had shaken their heads and disclaimed any knowledge of such men as Blue Morgan, Ben Ruby and Wild Bill Walsh.

It was as though a sinister shadow lay on the land—something that could be felt if not seen. Rainbow lay there thinking it over long after Grumpy was slumbering soundly. More than once he had seen an organized gang of desperadoes terrorize a range. He could find no better explanation for the present situation. The violence and rash of brutal killings that invariably resulted from such a state of affairs had not yet broken out here. What tomorrow might bring was another story.

THEY had picketed their horses out on the little flat in which they were camped. Rainbow was giving them a last glance before closing his eyes when he noticed that the animals had their heads up. It caught his immediate attention. The moon was low and the dense willow brakes along the twisting stream held the little flat in shadow. The horses' attention was sharply fixed on the trees now.

"Grumpy!" Rainbow whispered. "Wake up! We've got company!"

The little man sat up, blinking his eyes. "Where?" he demanded, reaching for his rifle.

"Over in the willows. Sit tight a second."

As they waited, tension building up in them, something sailed through the air and fell at Ripley's feet. It was close enough for him to see that it was a rock. A piece of paper was bound around it. In a patch of filtering moonlight he read the brief message.

Look Fer Blue At Ute Crossin'

"Come on!" Rainbow jerked out tensely. "We're going to have a look at the gent who delivered this! Come up in back of him! I'll go this way!"

They had not taken three steps before a crashing in the willows warned them that their visitor did not intend to be trapped there. Rainbow tried to turn him back toward Grumpy, but the man was too quick for him. A few seconds later a shadowy figure darted across an opening in the brush, evidently with the intention of reaching his horse. A warning shot failed to stop him, and he reached the protection of a shallow gulch. When Rainbow tried to

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close in, the other's gun flamed red, and he wasn't fooling.

With the slugs whining about his ears like angry hornets, Ripley did not stand on ceremony. Lowering his head, he made a low, flying dive for the first convenient boulder. Before he could fire a shot, a wild shriek from Grumpy stopped him. The little fighting wild cat had reached the top of the gulch in back of his man. Splitting the night wide open with his blood-curdling war cry, he came crashing down on the surprised foe with the bone-crunching force of a battering-ram. The man's gun went flying, and when he slowly crawled to his feet, Grumpy had him covered. With recognition, the little one's voice rose in another shrill cry.

"Why, you dirty ole beef-stealin' son of a skunk!" he screeched. "What's the meanin' of you throwin' lead at us? Rainbow, look what I got here! It's old Yampa Jackson!"

"It ain't no one else," Rainbow agreed as his eyes fell on the old man.

"Now wait a minute, boys!" Yampa protested before they could say more. "I didn't mean you no harm. I jest didn't want you to know who brought you that message. Blue will fill me full of holes if he finds out."

"He won't find out from us." Rainbow's tone had a grim edge. "Where do you figure in this? I thought you'd settled down to respectable living."

"I have," the snag-toothed old reprobate insisted. "I been runnin' my saloon at Ute Crossin' fer two years and mindin' my knittin'. Of course, I been sellin' a little likker to some of them reservation Utes and mebbe been a mite free with the nice fat yearlin's that drift down the crick ever' onct in a while. But I ain't busted out like I used to. 'Bout four weeks ago Blue walks in one mornin' and slaps fifty dollars down on the bar an' tells me the place is his; that I kin git my belongin's an' drift, an' be damn thankful he's so generous."

The old man licked his ragged mustache, and in the moonlight his eyes were wells of hate.

"He had Wild Bill an' Ruby and Chink Johnson with him," he went on. "I told Jenny—she's my squaw—to roll the blankets; that we was movin'." He waggled his head gravely. "I been keepin' my mouth shut, but I aim to git even."

"Yampa, was Blue mixed up in wrecking that train at Split Mountain?"

The old man's rheumy eyes narrowed at the question. "I wouldn't know, Rainbow—"

"You know, but you won't say. Is that it?"

Yampa Jackson rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "Boys, you know my principles. I don't do any tongue-waggin' about what's cookin' in the other feller's pot."

"All right," Rainbow told him. "Find your horse and get out of here."

In a few minutes they heard him riding away. They listened until the night was still again.

"You find friends in strange places in this business of ours," Rainbow murmured.

"Good Christopher!" Grumpy burst out. "You ain't swallerin' that story, are you? That thievin' ole booger would sell out St. Peter for a ten-cent piece! If this ain't a trap, I'm loco!"

"I don't know," Rainbow admitted soberly, "but we're getting out of here right now."

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CHAPTER IV

BLACKLEG WARNING

"WE goin' to ride the rest of this night?" Grumpy demanded. "We must've come fifteen miles. I reckon if there was anyone tailin' us we lost 'em a long way back."

"We've come far enough," Rainbow informed him. "Cut down the slope to that clump of aspens and we'll pull the saddles off these horses and try to get a little sleep. I'm going in to Vernal in the morning and see if there's an answer to the letter I sent the Wasatch Woolen Mills. That'll leave us the rest of the day to get over the divide above Ute Crossing."

Rainbow found a reply to his letter awaiting him in Vernal. He read it with evident satisfaction.

"No need to ask if the news is up to yore expectations," his partner observed dryly. "That pussy-cat grin is answer enough."

"The number I sent them is a new one, they say," Rainbow told him. "Some shipments have gone out, but none locally. They've sent along a sample of the material. Here it is!"

Grumpy had a look at it. "Kind o' like one of them Scotch plaids. They're all pretty much the same to me."

"No two of 'em are alike," Rainbow told him. "I'll explain that to you some day. It's quite a story."

Riding past a saloon as they were leaving town, they saw a dark-faced man in worn overalls and a sweat-stained Stetson eying them curiously. Rainbow glanced back to see him disappearing into the barroom with undue haste.

"That tough-looking gent will be out the back door and heading for his horse in a minute," he told Grumpy. "He's going to tail us, unless I miss my guess."

"Suppose we shake him off right now," Grumpy suggested. "These broncs are fresh. Throw the steel into 'em!"

They were followed, but in the wild, broken country to the north it was easy to discourage pursuit. After losing sight of the lone rider, they saw no one for the rest of the morning. By early afternoon they were on Ute Creek. Keeping to the rim of the shallow canyon through which it flowed, eventually brought them within sight of the Crossing. By that time the afternoon was half gone.

"I don't know what's down there. It looks peaceful enough, but we shore better size it up purty careful before we go bustin' in." Grumpy gave the horse shed in back of the unpainted, weather-beaten dive a close scrutiny. The saloon, boards covering its broken windows, the shed and a barn that tilted so crazily on its rotten underpinning that it promised to collapse at any moment were the only buildings in Ute Crossing. "Four, five broncs tethered in the shed," he announced.

Rainbow nodded. "Business must be good."

They had reconnoitered the place for half an hour when a man came to the door and tossed out a pailful of slops. He was too far away for them to say who he was. But Rainbow had reached a decision.

"It'd be foolish to try to walk in and surprise them," he said. "Our best bet is to cut over to the road and ride up as though we had a right to. If Blue's down there, there won't be any gunplay! He knows we'd do something about that. He also knows we haven't any evidence against him. If he isn't there, look out for trouble!"

"A bushel of it, I reckon!"

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Grumpy scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment. "It's yore opinion that Yampa Jackson told us a reasonably straight story, eh?"

"No, this may be a jackpot. Whatever it is, we've got to crack it. Well, if you're ready, we'll go."

A FEW minutes after they reached the road they came in sight of the saloon. They took it for granted that they were seen. Jogging up to the open door, they stepped down from their saddles and walked in. They found five men, counting the bartender, in the room. The way they had arranged themselves—a man at either end of the bar, one at a table to the rear and the fourth occupying a tilted chair by the window—said plainly enough that they had not been surprised.

"Well, old home week!" Rainbow laughed. The men Yampa had mentioned were all present, save Blue himself.

A strained silence greeted the sally. The partners walked up to the bar and Ripley tossed a silver dollar on the counter. "Rye," he said.

Grumpy swung around carelessly, his back to the bar, ready for whatever was to come.

The bartender was slow in setting out a bottle and glasses. Rainbow's attention was nicely divided between him and the reflection in the cracked back-bar mirror of the moon-faced man who sprawled in the chair by the window, a tough, thick-skulled young desperado who answered to the name of Chink Johnson. He had a record a yard long and had done time in three or four States. Ripley was particularly interested in the shirt Chink was wearing. It was spotted and grease-stained, but it was new, and Rainbow told himself if it had not been cut from the same goods as the sample he had received that morning his eyes were tricking him.

"Took you a long while to get around," a voice broke up the weighted quiet of the room. "I figured you gents would be lookin' me up."

Out of the corner of his eye Rainbow saw Blue Morgan filling the doorway that led to the back room. It was Blue's boast that he had a great sense of humor. There was a grin on his dark face now, but his eyes were not smiling. He came up in back of the bar and poured himself a drink with studied deliberation. "What's on your mind?" He spoke with the faintest suggestion of a lisp. Years of trying to hide the affliction had resulted in his speaking with barest possible movement of his lips. It made a mouth that had never been touched with mercy or pity doubly forbidding.

"Nothing in particular," Rainbow returned casually. "Yampa around?"

Grumpy heard the question without raising an eyebrow, but he wondered at Rainbow asking it.

"Not any more," answered Blue. "I'm runnin' this joint."

"So?" Ripley jerked his head to indicate the customers. "Looks as though business was improving. That homemade white mule old Yampa used to cook up wasn't anything to make a man come back twice."

They were only fencing. It didn't satisfy Morgan.

"Any reason why the boys shouldn't drop in?" he demanded more pointedly.

"Not at all. They've got to have some place to do their home work."

Blue's eyes took on a harder glint, but he laughed. "You're quite a

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joker, Ripley! I hear you're working for the railroad."

He realized that he had said almost too much even before Grumpy growled: "News shore gits around in a hurry, don't it? Ask him where he got his information, Rainbow!"

"It's no secret," his partner countered. He knew what he wanted, and he didn't propose to let the situation get away from him. "We're trying to find out who wrecked that freight over at Split Mountain, Morgan. It wasn't robbery. The company figures someone was squaring a grudge."

"So they say," Blue muttered. Something in his eyes said he was not being fooled.

"I aim to find out what old Yampa knows about it," Rainbow persisted. "He used to do a lot of blowin' off about getting even with the Shortline because they wouldn't recognize his title to that range he'd been squatting on over at Ashley."

THIS was sheer invention, but it was good enough. Chink Johnson and the others relaxed. Even Blue seemed to find possibilities in the idea.

"That old bag of bones is half cracked," he declared. "No tellin' what he'd do. He must be somewhere around the Agency."

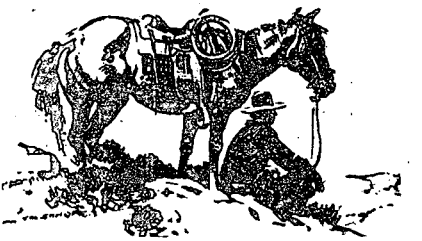
"Thanks," Rainbow murmured. "We'll be heading that way."

With a word to Grumpy, he started out.

"Drop in again sometime," Blue invited as the partners were riding away.

"We will," Rainbow called back.

Grumpy heaved a heavy sigh of relief when they had put the shoulder of the first mountain between themselves and Ute Crossing. "The



ole ticker was standin' still there for a minute or two," he declared. "That was a fine cock-and-bull story about Yampa Jackson bein' mixed up in this. But they swallered it. Reckon they figger we're jest a pair of halfwits."

"We'll have to convince 'em of it," Rainbow said, grinning. "The best way to do it is to slap Yampa into jail and hold him on suspicion for a few weeks. He won't mind; he'll feel right to home. Did you get a good look at the shirt Chink was wearing?"

"Did I?" the little man grunted. "Reckon we know where it came from!"

Ripley nodded. "We may be mistaken, but it wouldn't seem so."

Grumpy glared at him disgustedly. "Good gravy! You know they're the bunch that wrecked that train!"

"No doubt about it, but we're a long way from proving it."

They did not overlook the chance that Morgan would have one of his men trailing them. Accordingly, when they reached the fork in the road that led to the Uinta Agency, they turned off and made a bluff at riding in, though they knew Yampa was certainly not there. From a point of vantage they watched the road north for an hour. They were not far from the line now, and it was their intention to go over Ute Pass and on to Black Forks that evening. Deciding finally that it was safe to put in an appearance,

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even though the Agency road was being watched, they started to climb into their saddles only to be stopped by the sight of two riders coming up from the direction of the Crossing. The two horsemen were moving right along.

"Huh!" Grumpy jerked out. "It's Blue and Chink Johnson! We'll wish we'd gone on to the Agency if they turn up this way!"

"They're moving too fast to be looking for us," argued Rainbow. "They're going over the pass, too."

Morgan and Johnson reined up sharply, however, as they reached the forks. A glance at the tracks in the dust seemed to satisfy them, and they soon disappeared to the north.

"Can't be too careful with them gents," Grumpy remarked. "Guess we kin be movin' now."

EVENING was closing down by the time they rode into Black Forks. The increased activity on the banks of the river and double the number of tents they had last observed there told them Professor Hammersley and his party had arrived from the East.

"I suppose Hammersley wonders where we are," Rainbow remarked. "I wrote him he'd find us here."

"It'll be a pleasure to tell him we're doin' somethin' else," piped up Grumpy. "We kin ride down after we git a line on what Morgan's doin' here."

At the hotel, the clerk told them Professor Hammersley had been inquiring about them. Rainbow registered, and he was surprised to see Blue Morgan's signature on the line above his own. "We'll have Room 5 again if it's just the same to you," he told the boy.

Cold water and a clean shave sharpened the edge of their appetite, and they were about to go down to supper when they heard someone enter the room next door. Rainbow put his ear to the wall and listened until he was convinced that their neighbor was alone.

"What was the idee of that?" asked Grumpy.

Rainbow smiled. "Do you know who we've got next door?"

"No."

"Blue. That's why I asked for this room."

After they had eaten, they took a turn up and down the street. A light burned in Morgan's room and the shade was down.

"Looks like he was expectin' company," Grumpy observed. "Mebbe we better— Say, what's eatin' you?" he said sharply as Rainbow caught him by the arm and pulled him back when he would have crossed the street. The other had just noticed Chink Johnson leaning against the hitch rack of the saloon opposite. Chink's attitude was not that of a man who had ridden into town and was only killing time. His attention was fixed on the newspaper office next door, inside of which the partners could see Ed Burgess, the editor, talking to a rocky-faced man in a belted corduroy coat of military cut.

When the stranger came out, Chink stepped up to him and handed him a note. The man took it and continued up the street. Rainbow and Grumpy saw him stop in front of the lighted windows of the general store and read the message. Surprise and rage chased each other across his hard face.

"Whatever it is, he don't like it," Grumpy muttered. "Acts as though it smacked him straight between the eyes."

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The man started to tear up the note, then crammed it in his pocket. After a moment's hesitation he swung around on his heels and made directly for the hotel.

"Come on!" Rainbow got out quickly. "This may be the party Blue's waiting to see. We'll get there ahead of him!"

A FEW seconds after they reached their room they heard a loud knock at Morgan's door, and then Blue saying: "It's open! Walk in!"

The stranger entered, slamming the door behind him.

"It's been a long time, Brant, since our trails crossed. Take a chair." Morgan's tone belied the hospitality he offered.

"No, we'll make this short!" was the hostile answer.

"The shorter the better," Blue said with flinty inflection. "We can discuss our business in a hurry, and without blattin' it out for the rest of the hotel to hear. The walls in this dump are damned thin."

Brant took the hint. They talked for four or five minutes, and neither Rainbow nor Grumpy could catch what they were saying. Finally Morgan burst out angrily: "Don't try to fill me full of anythin' like that! This guy Hammersley and his bunch don't mean a damned thing to me! They look crazy enough to risk their necks tryin' to find mineral deposits down the canyons. But not you, Brant! You got somethin' else up your sleeve!"

"I'm being well paid for my services," Samson Brant said flatly. "Hammersley's got a lot of money. Why shouldn't I take the good pickings?"

"Don't kid me!" Morgan rapped out fiercely. "I know what your game is, and I'm tellin' you to forget it!"

Brant met the challenge with a contemptuous laugh. "I didn't think you'd have the brass to put anything up to me like that! You get in my way, and you'll get hurt!"

"You've had your warnin'!" Blue flung at him. "I've sized up the crowd you've got here with you an' I can match 'em, man for man!"

"You fool!" Anger and contempt strove for mastery in Brant. With a curse, he flung himself out of the room. Rainbow and Grumpy could hear him clumping down the stairs. In about five minutes Blue Morgan departed.

"Waal, what do you make of that?" Grumpy demanded excitedly. "This Brant must be Hammersley's right-hand man. What's this game Blue says he's wise to? And what is there down them canyons that he don't want Brant to git his hands on? Is he figgerin' to kidnap them perfessors or rob 'em blind? Or what the dang-blasted answer is there to this riddle?"

Rainbow had no immediate answer. "What's the point in guessing?" he inquired flatly. "All I can tell you now is that I wasn't saying more than I meant when I told you we were taking cards in the biggest game of our lives. For the present, we'll keep our mouths shut and saw wood. Come on! We're going to see Professor Hammersley!"

Will Rainbow and Grumpy change their minds about working for Professor Hammersley? What are Brant and the professor plotting? Is Rainbow correct in believing that Blue Morgan's gang wrecked the freight train? Another absorbing installment of this adventure-packed serial appears in next week's Western Story.

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Jim was almost ready to call it a night when he saw the ghostly outline of the pirate boat breaking through the fog.

STEELHEAD SAVVY

by Frank Richardson Pierce

FISHING conditions were perfect for steelhead. The water was neither too high, nor too low. The water wasn't too clear, nor was it too cloudy. Just right. If a man had lived a clean life, if he had never kicked a dog nor refused a drink, and if he parted his hair just right, and put the required amount of bait —no more, no less—on the hook, he just might tangle with one of the big-game fish.

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Jim Kennedy checked over his past and gave himself a grade of ninety percent. Then he blew on his fingers until the numbness was gone.

"Man! But it's cold," he grumbled. Opening a bait can, he cut off a hunk of fresh salmon eggs and placed it on the hook. He made sure there were no branches in the immediate vicinity; then, drawing back his pole, he cast.

The line leaped through the frosty air in a superb arc and the bait and sinkers dropped expertly above a little falls. The current caught the bait, drew it over the falls and rolled it slowly over the bottom of a big pool.

Jim hardly breathed. He could feel frequent movement over the line. Probably that was the sinkers rolling over the rocky bottom, but it might be a steelhead taking the bait. Steelhead is an odd fish. It doesn't grab the bait and rush around. It holds the bait in its mouth, something like a small boy with a lollypop. Action starts when the smart fisherman senses what is going on and sets the hook with a deft jerk.

Jim reeled in the line and watched it glaze as the cold air struck it: Ice particles, like frost, flew from the reel.

"A man who goes steelhead fishing should have his head examined," Jim growled. "Four days in a row, and never a strike. It's a good thing I'm out of a job or I couldn't afford to waste the time. I'll bet there isn't a steelhead in the Snoguamish from tidewater to snow line. I'll bet—"

He broke off and moved down to the next hole. Something was wrong. He had sneaked up on several holes and peered into the cold depths. Usually the big trout were visible, but he hadn't seen even one. Perhaps they hadn't come up from salt water. Still, on reflection, Jim concluded that wasn't reasonable. Steelhead entered the Snoguamish about the time they came up other streams.

"One more cast!" he said. Quietly he approached a pool and dropped the bait into the little falls. He felt it move along the bottom.

Suddenly the vibration on pole and line was different. Jim snapped the pole expertly, and then it happened.

The line knifed across the pool, sending spray into the air. It tightened and a nine-pounder broke water, rainbow colors flashing in the cold sunlight. It struck and sped downstream. Jim clumped along in his rubber boots, giving the trout line, and hoping it would stop before the line was gone.

THE trout dropped into another pool, circled it a couple of times, then went to the bottom and sulked. Jim tightened the line, and got action. He played the trout in the pool until it tired, then brought it to a bar and killed it. As he started to remove the hook he stiffened.

"No wonder!" he roared. "No wonder there're no fish in the Snoguamish! What's the matter with our game wardens, anyway? Why don't they stop this kind of thing?"

Jim's rage continued. Anyone who has fished day after day, with the thermometer below freezing, and has caught nothing, will understand his frame of mind. He pushed through brush and across fields until he reached his car, then he raced through the frosty air to town. He parked in front of an office building, took the steelhead, which

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he had wrapped in a grain sack, and made his way to the game warden's office.

"I want to see the biggest shot around here," he told the girl who came to the counter.

The girl regarded him tolerantly and without surprise. Another sportsman with a beef in his system. She called the chief warden in the area. "A man with a fish to see you, Mr. Lee."

Dan Lee came out of his office, moving with the beautiful flow of muscles so common to men who spend much of their time in the open.

"Come in, Mr. Kennedy," he invited with hearty friendliness.

Jim Kennedy stalked into the warden's private office. "Look at this!" he exclaimed, holding out the steelhead. "No wonder there are no fish in the Snoguamish!"

"Hm-m-m!" Lee said, making a quick examination. "Gill net marks."

"Exactly," Jim agreed. "This steelhead was caught in a net, and got loose. Why isn't something done about such things? We fishermen pay a license fee to stop this sort of business."

"We've had a lot of trouble with gill netters at the mouth of the Snoguamish," Lee explained. "You see, there's an Indian reservation nearby. A steelhead stream runs through the reservation. Because of a treaty with the Indians, natives are allowed to net and sell steelhead."

"Ah!" Jim exclaimed. He hadn't cooled off yet. "The Indians sneak over and drop their nets in the mouth of the Snoguamish, and claim the fish came from their own river. Why don't you stop them?"

"THE Indians do nothing of the kind," contradicted Lee. "They do, however, sell their catches to white buyers. And I've an idea the white buyers poach off the Snoguamish when conditions are right, and mix their catches in with the fish they buy from the natives."

"Then why isn't *that* stopped?" Jim demanded. "Why should the sportsmen pay for conservation just to have some commercial fisherman come along and skim the cream? Normally, I'm not a man to bellyache. If I fish or hunt all day and the game is too smart for me, I don't complain. I've had a day in the open and am that much ahead. But when a fish or game hog spoils my fun, I get fighting mad."

"I understand you perfectly. You're a sportsman, and your complaint is just—"

"Blast it!" Jim exploded. "If you'd get mad and tell me off, I could cuss you out and feel better. Why don't you hire men who can catch these game hogs?"

"My dear Mr. Kennedy," Lee answered, "I have a standing offer of a permanent job as deputy game warden to any man who will arrest and convict the poacher who is cleaning up at the mouth of the Snoguamish. No one knows better than I that if this keeps up, the Snoguamish will be finished as a steelhead stream." He gave Jim a searching glance. "I'll even give a temporary deputy the poacher's name."

"That would be a cinch!" Jim exclaimed.

"Want to take it on?" There was fire in the warden's eyes now—fire and a challenge.

"Darned right I'll take it on!" Jim retorted. "What's this bird's name. And when do I start in?"

"His name is Fritz Krump and

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you start in right now," the warden answered.

"O. K."

The warden went thoroughly into Jim Kennedy's recent history and found it satisfactory. Jim had lost his last job because the company had gone broke, and his record in previous positions was excellent. He was a big, husky fellow who looked as if he could take care of himself in a rough and tumble fight. And wardens have to be that type of fighter because poaches are usually tough, hard-bitten men.

"Come around tomorrow," ordered the warden, "and you'll be sworn in and given your tools."

"Thanks," Jim said, picking up the steelhead.

After Jim had gone, Dan Lee sauntered into the outer office. "Well, what do you think of the latest deputy warden?" he asked the girl at the counter.

"He has a sense of humor, at least," she answered. "While he was waiting for the elevator his voice came in over the open transom. He seemed to think it was a horse on him."

"What did he say?"

"'Always shooting off your big mouth or sticking your neck out,'" she quoted, "'I wonder if you'll ever learn?'"

THE warden made it quite clear that Jim Kennedy was on his own. "Get the evidence on Fritz Krump in your own way," he said, "but be sure it will stand up in court."

"You've no other orders?"

"No. Going after Krump is job enough for a man without giving him the added burden of specific instructions," declared Lee.

Jim decided it might be worthwhile looking over his man. He checked on Krump's habits and learned that the poacher docked at a wharf frequented by fishermen, and might be seen there any Monday or Thursday morning. Jim was on hand the following Thursday morning.

Krump's gas boat, the *Hilda K*, came out of the early morning mists after an all-night run. It was Diesel-powered and fast. A man took the lines and presently the boat was tied up at the float. Fish buyers, followed by husky men carrying empty boxes with rope handles, came down and one of them asked: "Got any steelhead, Fritz?"

"I've always got steelhead,"

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Krump answered. He was a big, broad-shouldered, deep-chested man. He threw out his chest and winked knowingly.

"Others can't seem to get 'em," said a buyer.

"I know where to go."

"*Cumtux Chinook wa-wa?*" the buyer asked, meaning: "Understand Chinook talk?"

"That's right."

Krump's men opened a hatch, and the sight made Jim's eyes open. Hundreds of steelhead, running from six to ten pounds, lay in rows on cracked ice. All carried gill-net marks; that is, the webbing had rubbed off the scales and skin behind the gills as a result of the fish's effort to free itself. Perhaps Krump had bought some of the fish from the Indians, but Jim was confident many had come from forbidden waters—the mouth of the Snoguamish.

Jim walked along the float until he reached the stern of the gas boat. Gill nets lay in piles just as the fishermen had left them after removing the fish. Bits of seaweed, moss and even a few gills were visible on the webbing. "If only there was some way of painting Snoguamish fish," he reflected, "so that they would leave a smear on the webbing to prove they were caught in closed waters. There must be some way of hanging it on those birds."

KRUMP'S cocky, smug attitude continued to get under the new deputy warden's skin. Jim had an idea the poacher used his knowledge of every trick of the tide to make the raids on the Snoguamish steelhead.

Undoubtedly Krump waited until the night was exceptionally dark or foggy, then nosed in toward the river mouth and shut off his motor. With nets out he drifted with the current. Schools of fish, swimming against the current as they obeyed the instinct to find their way upriver, naturally struck the nets. Hauling them in and stowing the fish below would be a quiet process for men skilled in the poaching game.

"A tough-looking bunch," Jim concluded. "Some of them would just as soon tie a rock to your feet and dump you overboard, as not."

Steelhead brought prices that made the risk well worth-while. But the profit for the few was nothing compared to the profit to the many in sport, fishing tackle sold and exercise in the open. Besides Fritz Krump had an advantage over the other commercial fishermen. Because he could usually come through with a catch, buyers turned to him and the other fishermen were forced to accept what market was left.

Jim's first hunch was to get acquainted with Krump's rivals but he decided against it. A man taking such chances doubtless had spies planted on rival ships to report moves made against him. "It boils down to this," Jim told himself. "I've got to play a lone game."

Several days later Jim loaded a portable canvas boat onto the top of his car and drove to the Snoguamish River. He camped near the mouth at a spot sportsmen favored, cached the boat in a nearby thicket and began fishing.

Sam Graham, who owned the dairy ranch across the river, came down and looked across. He was a slim, nervous man who acted as if he expected a lawman to jump out of the nearest bush and arrest him. His fences were plastered with "No Hunting And Fishing" signs.

"You might as well quit and go

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home," Graham yelled to Jim. "There ain't been a fish took out of the river in weeks. Steelhead don't run up here no more. Of course it ain't none of my business, but I hate to see a man disappointed. Why don't you try the Klone-chuck?"

"I don't care whether I catch fish or not," Jim yelled back. "I'm out on a vacation."

"It's a mighty poor time of the year to take it," said Graham.

"I didn't have any choice in the matter," Jim told him. "Doctor's orders. I've been cooped up too long. Need the open air." He drew in a deep breath and asked: "How's to buy some fresh milk and eggs?"

"Ain't got none to sell," answered the dairyman. He watched Jim several minutes longer, as if turning something over in his mind, then headed back across a field to his house.

"As a guess, I'd say he's anxious to get rid of me," Jim mused. "And I'm not even on his side of the river. I wonder if he saw me unload that boat?"

About nine o'clock, Jim crawled into his sleeping bag and listened to the flow of the river. Through the open flap of his pup tent he could see the lights in Graham's house. One shade on a second-floor window was down, but the shade on the adjoining window was raised halfway. This probably was unimportant, Jim decided, but the windows faced the sea. Jim fell asleep, but awakened around midnight, nerves tense, instincts alert to danger. He hadn't heard a thing, but he had a feeling he was being watched. The shades were unchanged.

Jim breathed steadily, heavily, as if in deep sleep. Suddenly he heard the sound of boots moving cautiously through stubble and straw. The sound grew less and died, then there was the clatter of oars in locks. It was around four o'clock before Jim fell asleep again.

The sun was well up when he awakened. He got breakfast, then picked up his fishing rod and walked along the shore. He was more interested in tracks than steelhead, and he found them. Someone had crouched behind a straw stack near his tent. The stubble was ground into the half-frozen dirt by boot heels. Footprints led upstream to a point where a boat had been moored.

"It looks as if Graham was watching me," Jim mused. "He's probably the lookout for Krump's operations. The curtain shade signals when things are safe."

A dozen steelhead lay like shadows in the nearest pool. Jim stopped in his tracks and stared, then he hurried downstream. There were steelhead in even the smaller pools. With no nets to stop them, a big school had come in from salt water during the night.

Jim felt he was on the right track, but the problem was to get evidence that would convict a smart man like Krump and defeat the smooth lawyers the poacher would be certain to hire for his defense. Jim's thoughts went back to the gas boat with its piled nets, fragments of seaweed and scales clinging to the fabric.

For the benefit of any observers, Jim began fishing. He climbed over a low point, his boots smashing stubble and kicking straw aside, and dropped down onto the next pool. He was casting his line when suddenly he thought he saw the answer. It was amazingly simple when he first considered the plan,

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then doubt came.

"Simple in execution," he reflected, "but it's a gamble. If I slip I'll be out a job, the game commission will be a laughingstock and Krump will be doing the laughing. Still . . . a gamble is the only thing that'll work against Krump, because the man himself is gambling on outsmarting the wardens."

Jim caught two steelhead without even trying, and as he landed the last one Graham came over to the bank on his side of the river. Silently he watched Jim play the trout.

"I got more fish than I can eat," Jim said. "Want one?"

"I don't like fish," Graham answered.

"I don't believe in wasting them," said Jim. "I guess this cuts my vacation short. Might as well break camp, go home, and come back in a couple of days."

"And I suppose you'll show the fish to everybody, tell 'em where you got it, and a hundred guys will be here tomorrow fishing," complained Graham.

"I'm not that big a fool," Jim retorted. "I'm keeping this spot to myself. S'long. I'll be back next week some time."

JIM broke camp, loaded his boat onto the car and headed for home. He arrived in midafternoon and immediately called on Dan Lee.

"I think I'm on a hot trail," he told the warden. He related what had happened. "What I need now is a couple of close-mouthed men to give me a hand."

"Are you planning to break the case tonight?" asked the warden.

"Why not?" Jim countered. "Graham thinks I'm through for several days, and unless some one else camps there he'll give Krump the signal to go ahead. Tonight is the time to catch them red-handed. And I'd appreciate it if you'd be on the landing when we show up."

"I'll be there," the warden promised. Outwardly he was enthusiastic, but inwardly he entertained serious doubts. Krump had put it over on game wardens too many times. "I'll give you Sather and Mullens. They're both good men."

That evening Jim picked up Sather and Mullens and got under way. He stopped his car at a town, about ten miles from Graham's.

"I could go for a hot meal," he told his companions, "but some friend of Graham's might spot us and report. That's why I didn't telephone the warden. A farmer on one of the party lines might be listening in and tip off Graham or Krump."

They ate cold food and drank hot coffee from thermos bottles. The temperature was around freezing, and a raw wind was blowing out of the north. After they had finished the meal, Jim drove through town, continued on the highway several miles, then doubled back and took the road leading to within a half-mile of the river mouth. He turned off the lights and crawled along, hoping he wouldn't miss a turn. He parked the car in a thicket, and with the help of his two companions, unloaded the boat.

"That's Graham's on that low bench or ridge across the river," Jim said.

"The one with the lights in the two upper windows?" inquired Sather.

"Yes," Jim answered. "One curtain was halfway down last night. It's up now. I hope that's the all-clear signal."

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They carried the boat across a field of stubble to the river bank. Jim stepped in quietly, holding a willow to keep from drifting with the current.

"You fellows know what you are supposed to do," he said. "It's a cold job and I don't envy you."

"It won't be as tough as yours, squatting in the cold, not daring to move, waiting for something to happen," Sather declared.

Jim let go and drifted downstream. He sat in the stern with a paddle, keeping the boat clear of boulders and snags. The tide was high and, as he neared the salt water, the current grew sluggish, then stopped.

Jim dropped anchor a quarter mile off shore and waited. Despite the lateness of the hour the lights continued to burn brightly in Graham's windows. Studying the windows through powerful binoculars, Jim could see Graham sitting in an easy-chair, back to a bright reading lamp, evidently interested in a book or newspaper.

The dairyman was making his part of the play look natural—so natural, in fact, Jim began to wonder if his own suspicions were groundless.

The tide began going out, and in an hour or two the steelhead, feeling the strength of the current, would start moving upstream. Two hours passed without incident, except for steamers passing several miles offshore. A tug about a mile out puffed by, dragging a boom of logs, but otherwise there was no movement.

JIM's first warning was the slap of water against a stout wooden hull. His boat was gray-black and he was wearing black gloves, and a black muffler around his face because he wanted no chance light striking his skin. Staring intently at the gloom, he saw the *Hilda K's* vague outline coming toward him. Occasionally the bow shifted slightly, proving the boat was moving under some sort of power, though the tide accounted for most of her progress.

As she came opposite Jim he saw that a huge tarp which had been rolled up on her deck was now serving as a jib. A light breeze gave her the necessary steerageway.

Two gill nets, each held in place by men in dories, extended from either side of the boat. To Jim they looked rather like a pair of arms extending straight out from the body, gathering in everything. Now the

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river current had caught the boat and was carrying her to deeper water. An anchor was lowered over the stern to check the craft's progress.

"No telling what's going on under water," Jim mused. "Hundreds of steelheads hitting the nets and being caught by the gills, probably." He wanted to go closer, but there was danger of detection.

The boat remained anchored about an hour, then the anchor was hauled up. The current carried the craft to deeper water, where the tide picked her up. In another fifteen minutes the *Hilda K* was well into the channel.

The dories came in and were taken aboard and nested. Men gathered in the stern and by main strength began hauling the nets. It was an all-hands job because speed was necessary. For the moment even the cook and engineers were fishermen.

Jim Kennedy paddled his canvas boat slowly toward the bow of the *Hilda K*. Standing up he reached the anchor, then he kicked his boat clear. The tide would carry it off and unless a crew member came forward, it wouldn't be seen.

"Burned my bridges now," he mused. He straightened up, his feet on the anchor flukes, and studied the deck. There was some debris on it, such as boxes and fuel tins. The wheelhouse was empty. Jim climbed aboard and hurried down the deck. His foot caught in a rope and pulled down a crate as he fell sprawling.

"What was that?" demanded Krump's voice sharply. "Lars, go for'd and see what's wrong. We might've fouled something."

Jim crouched and listened. The passage on the port and starboard side was narrow and afforded little room for hiding. If Lars came along the port side, then happened to return on the starboard, Jim was caught. There wasn't time to race up the ladder to the wheelhouse and get out of sight.

Jim held his breath until he heard the heavy rubber boots thumping down the starboard side. He slipped halfway down the port side and waited. In a few minutes he could see Lars' bulky figure in the bow. For a long time the man studied the water immediately below, then he peered into the gloom.

"Can't see nothin'," he yelled. "At first I thought I saw a skiff, but I guess it was a piece of drift," He walked slowly back, the way he had come.

Jim began to breathe again. He wasn't ready to make any arrests, nor to risk being quietly dropped over the side. Arrest and conviction would mean confiscation of the *Hilda K*, which would add thousands of dollars to the game commissioner's funds. It meant more—fines and imprisonment to every member of the crew.

WORKING his way back to the ladder, Jim climbed to the boat deck. It was small and crowded with gear, but there was a tarp-covered lifeboat just aft of the skipper's cabin. Jim crawled into the boat, kept the tarp lifted a few inches, and watched the men. The haul was a big one. The crew, in hip boots and slickers, was removing the steelhead and spreading them on ice. Every man worked expertly, with ears atuned for any unusual sound, and eyes looking swiftly about. They reminded Jim of rustlers cutting out cattle from a herd. They tossed the net impatiently

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aside, where it fell in folds. The work went on and on, then the last of the fish were in the hold.

"Full speed ahead," Krump ordered finally. The game warden was one fear, but being caught without lights by the coast guard was another.

The *Hilda K's* speed surprised Jim. She ran a half hour before the lights went on. Jim could hear the cook rattling the galley stove, and presently he caught the odor of steaks, frying potatoes and coffee.

"I could put away some of that grub," he muttered, "but I'll have to wait."

The men talked, laughed and smoked. Jim knew they were cleaning up big from the cut each expected to get from the raid. He relaxed, even dozed the last couple of hours. When he awakened, the *Hilda K* was nearing the landing and a game-warden motorboat was running alongside. He could see Sather at the wheel.

"What've they got up their sleeves now?" Jim heard the mate ask Krump.

"I don't know," Krump answered, "but whatever it is, it won't work. They haven't anything on us. We bought this fish from the Indians and can prove it . . . by the Indians."

"After you sober up your witnesses," the mate suggested. "They may get us on the giving-whiskey-to-the-Indians deal some of these days. We can be convicted for fishing anywhere near the mouth of the Snoguamish," he continued. "We don't have to *catch* 'em to be guilty. The law forbids fishing anywhere near the river mouth."

"The man doesn't live who can prove we did," Krump argued. "They'd have to buy off Graham before they could even catch us, and he'll never sell us out. We've got too much on him. We'll soon learn what this is all about."

"Now's as good a time as any," Jim said, dropping out of the lifeboat. "You're under arrest for fishing at the mouth of the Snoguamish. I'm including boat, cargo and crew. That's why the warden's launch is following you. They wanted to be sure nothing happened to me last night."

"You haven't a thing on us," Krump said, recovering from his amazement. "And if you think you have you'd better prove it, because if you don't I'll make you wardens look foolish, and I'll sue you to hell and gone for damages."

"I guess you will," Jim admitted, "if I don't prove it."

A DELEGATION awaited them at the landing. Jim saw Dan Lee, the game warden, the prosecuting attorney and several men who looked important, but were strangers to him.

"Hello, Jim," the warden shouted.

"Good morning, Mr. Lee," called Jim.

"I don't need to ask you if you've a case. Your face shows it," Lee said.

Krump was talking loudly, at the same time desperately striving to guess the evidence Jim would produce against him. He was the first man on the landing.

"This is a frame-up, Mr. Oliver," he said to his lawyer. I'm glad you're here."

Mr. Oliver wasn't so sure it was a frame-up. When a game warden calls a lawyer and explains he is about to arrest his client and that the lawyer had better be on hand,

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there is some pretty important evidence ready to be submitted.

"As you know, Krump," the warden said, "we forfeit guns, tackle, game and fish whenever we catch a man engaged in illegal hunting or fishing. The steelhead will go to various charitable institutions, and your boat will be sold, if you're proven guilty. Is that clear?"

"Yep," Krump said shortly. "And it's clear I'm going to start slugging my way out of this, too. Not with fists, but with the law."

"Have you ever fished off the mouth of the Snoguamish?" the warden asked. "Or any other fresh-water stream?"

"No!"

"When did you last use your nets?"

"Yesterday afternoon, in Windy Channel," answered Krump.

The warden rested his hand on the *Hilda K's* rail, reached over and pulled several pieces of seaweed from the nearest net.

"How'd that stuff get there?" he asked.

"That's a crazy question," Krump said, "and any fool knows the answer, or should. Seaweed drifts with the current and is caught in the net."

"And you haven't cleaned your nets since you fished in Windy Channel yesterday afternoon?"

"Haven't had time. We caught a few fish there, then ran over to the Indian reservation and waited around until the natives got in with their catches. We bought 'em and run all night to get here."

"What's your story, Jim?" asked Lee.

"Without lights, they put out nets at the mouth of the Snoguamish and hauled the fish aboard," Jim answered.

"We've tried for a long time to prove this man, Krump, has been fishing off the mouth of the Snoguamish," Lee told the prosecuting attorney and newspaper men. "He's a smooth one. My new warden, Jim Kennedy, watched Krump unload the other day. Seaweed in the nets gave him an idea, though he didn't think of it until he'd spent a day camping on the edge of a stubble field bordering the Snoguamish. Then we went to it. Two of my men spent most of the night gathering straw and throwing it into the Snoguamish, where it would be carried down with the current. Jim reasoned if Krump's nets were there they'd pick up some of the straw. He needed such testimony to back up what he himself observed during the night. His word would have to overcome the testimony of Krump and his men."

"What happened?" a newspaperman asked.

"See for yourself," answered the warden. He grasped the end of a net and pulled several fathoms onto the wharf. In many places sodden straw was tangled in the webbing.

Krump stared, then glanced at his lawyer. The latter's eyes plainly said: "No use in fighting this case."

"We'll take the net as evidence and put it in safekeeping," the warden said to the prosecuting attorney. Then he turned to Jim. "I guess you can call it a day."

"Not yet," Jim retorted. "First I want to be measured for steak, spuds and coffee, then I'm going up to the Snoguamish and make one more arrest—Sam Graham. After that, I'm going to do a little fishing—for pleasure."

THE END

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REDEMPTION RANGE

by Norman A. Fox

When the stagecoach stopped before the Flintlock station, Steve Anthony saw the swelling mob that had gathered and knew it would be no easy thing to face it. Here was a town where hate bubbled beneath a thin crust of stolid sullenness, though in this respect Flintlock merely mirrored Steve's own mood. Across the dusty miles he had anticipated this hostility and rebelled against the futility of bucking it. To any man there might come such an hour of trial. To Steve Anthony, no stranger to danger, the issue was complicated because his wife and son were with him.

They sat stiffly at his side; Greta's pretty face a taut mask concealing her apprehension; ten-year-old Danny sobered by his parent's contagious tenseness. Steve spoke swiftly.

Steve was making every bullet count before Ludlow lead cut him down.

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"They know we've come to take over the ranch," he told his wife. "The stage only stops here ten minutes. No need to unload if you'd just as soon go on."

"Twelve years is a long time," said Greta. "Surely they still don't hold a grudge. Let's not run, Steve; not until there's something to run from."

She had made his decision for him. And because he had hesitated chiefly for her sake, Steve now swung open the door and dropped to the ground, a tall, lean man, square-faced and square-shouldered. He gave Greta his hand and hoisted Danny down after her. Then he turned to face the gathered men.

"Howdy," he said curtly. "Is this a reception committee?"

The three men at the mob's head were brothers, their blood tie manifesting itself in swarthy skins and a sameness to their bulking bigness. Steve had grown up with Beaut, Cass and Sim Ludlow. He recognized many faces looming behind the brothers, too, and it occurred to him that the trio had always been self-appointed leaders when deviltry was brewing. Beaut Ludlow swaggered a step forward.

"You wrote the county treasurer to make sure the title to old Dan Anthony's Boxed A was still in the clear," he snapped. "The ranch is yourn accordin' to the law, but you ain't settlin' on it. By rights that spread belongs to us that lost money when your dad's bank went bust here years ago. Better climb back on that stage, Anthony!"

His very tone was an insult, and Steve was swept by a desire to smash Beaut's leering face. But this was a time for convincing words. "You folks don't understand," he began. "I know what you thought about my father, but—"

"We ain't changed our minds none!" Beaut interjected. "And the same goes for you and your wife. Seeing as Greta was loco enough to marry the son of a thief—"

Steve hit him then, lashing out viciously and spilling Ludlow back into his brothers' arms where Beaut reeled, his lips bleeding.

"You filthy-tongued dog!" Steve raged and swung his eyes to the rest of them. "Anybody else got anything to say about my wife?"

IT was a moment when anything might have happened. The fact that nothing did was no indication of the true temper of this mob. Beaut Ludlow was struggling for his gun, but Steve, garbed in a dark traveling suit, visibly wore no weapon, and some of the gathered men had no stomach for murder. One of them was Hank Lafferty, grizzled cowman, who helped restrain Beaut. But there was no friendship in Lafferty's eyes as they swiveled to Steve.

"Beaut had no business draggin' Greta's name into this," the cowman conceded. "But he's told you how we all feel, Anthony. You'd better not settle here!"

"We'll finish this play sometime —alone!" Beaut raged.

Steve understood. He had struck Ludlow for the bully's sneer at Greta, and thus the issue had become a personal, man-to-man affair. The town's code forbade gunfire since Steve wasn't armed, and Beaut obviously had no desire for a slugging match. Already the mob was dispersing, the episode over. But there'd be a sequel if he, Steve, chose to stay here.

Little Danny was regarding his father with open hero worship, but Greta had turned pale. The stage

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driver, Steve noticed, was climbing to his perch.

"You wanted to stop at the bank before we went out to the Boxed A," Greta reminded her husband. "Danny and I will wait here."

Again Steve hesitated. Then he swung up the street, noting subconsciously that Flintlock had changed but little, the same rows of warped and weathered buildings frowning at each other across the dusty channel that was the main street. The red brick of the bank was only a rusty shadow of its former glory, but the gray ghost of a man who plied a broom near the door as Steve stepped inside was as he'd always been.

"Shuffle!" Steve said, extending his hand. "You working here again?"

"The bank was opened three years after your dad left," Shuffle McGinnis muttered, managing not to see the outstretched hand. "Martin Sloane, him that was your dad's cashier, took over and give me back the janitoring job. Heard you might be headin' this way, Steve."

"Greta's with me," Steve told him. "She's at the stage depot if you'd like to skip down and see her. And you can get your first look at your grandson, too."

"I'm mighty busy just now," mumbled Shuffle. "Maybe . . . uh . . . if you stay here, I could come out to the ranch—"

"You don't aim to take sides by publicly welcoming your daughter!" Steve said in sudden understanding, but there was more pity than scorn in him. Shuffle McGinnis had never owned anything approximating a backbone, and his wife had worked herself into an early grave to rear Greta, their only child. But Shuffle had to go on living in Flintlock, Steve remembered.

"I'll tell Greta," Steve said and strode toward the door of Martin Sloane's private office. His drumming knuckles brought him an invitation to enter and he faced a rotund man across an expanse of desk, noting that Sloane was twelve years balder and that sandy side whiskers had given him a sort of dignity.

WHY, Steve— Steve Anthony!" Sloane exclaimed, coming to his feet and extending his hand. Steve took it, not unaware that this first act of friendliness in the town was tempered only by the fact that the office window shade was drawn against the afternoon sun.

"Heard you wrote about the old Boxed A," Sloane hurried on. "Thinking of settling there, Steve? And how's your father?"

"Dan Anthony is dead," said Steve quietly. "A month now."

Martin Sloane turned properly sober. "Too bad . . . too bad," he murmured. "He gave me my start here in Flintlock. A good man, Steve."

"Some," remarked Steve, "don't think so."

"Dan's trouble was that he was more cowman than banker," Sloane observed. "He couldn't say 'no,' and he loaned money recklessly. When the cycle of dry years hit, he was caught short."

"And he had to leave this town two jumps ahead of a lynch rope," Steve added bitterly. "Greta and me were just married, remember? I couldn't see her snubbed by people who'd lost money. That's why I took her and joined dad down in Wyoming. We've had hard years since, Sloane."

"You've got to remember that folks trusted Dan with their money," Sloane said. "When they

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needed it to stave off ruin, he didn't have it. Yet he hung onto his own ranch, the best on the range. That didn't look good, Steve."

"I wondered about that, too," Steve admitted. "He protected it by having the deed in my name. But dad knew what he was doing. If he'd sold the ranch and divided the money, it wouldn't have gone far. Dad saved some money in the last twelve years, Sloane. He gave it to me and asked me to invest it in stock and run the ranch again. That's why I've come to see you—to get the name of every man who lost money in the old bank. Dad said you probably still had the books. You see, if I can make a go of the ranch, I intend to pay back every cent anyone lost."

Sloane was more than interested now. "You could do it in time!" he said.

Some of Steve's rebellion came back into his eyes. "I want no word of this to get around, Sloane. I'm not fawnin' for favor by airing a promise I don't know whether I can keep!"

"Just as you wish, Steve." Sloane shrugged. "The Boxed A is legally yours. Apparently your father paid the taxes all these years. The ranchhouse doesn't need much fixing, either. But it will be hard going for you, I'm afraid. Hard going!"

Much of this talk Steve remembered as he tooled a rented livery rig across the prairie's flatness toward the bulking Elkhorn Hills, Greta and Danny on the seat beside him. He loved this land of his boyhood, and nostalgia swept him as the miles unreeled and the terrain became broken. Here was shelter from the blizzard winds for the herd he would buy. The Boxed A was wedged back into the Elkhorns, a vast expanse of lush acreage traversed by canyons and ravines. Enthusiasm grew within Steve, then died abruptly as he topped a bluff to look down upon the ranchhouse. For now the building was a heap of smoldering ruins, smoke tendrils still coiling about it.

"Burned!" he gasped. "Burned out!"

Yonder three riders quirted their horses in rapid retreat and, although the distance was great, Steve recognized the Ludlow brothers, from their blocky shoulders and burly figures. He clawed at suitcase straps, seeking the gun he'd stowed away. But in the midst of the effort he knew the moment of retaliation was lost.

"Beaut Ludlow has evened up for that belt in the teeth," he said hollowly. "I thought I was bringing you home, but there isn't any, Greta."

He didn't want to meet his wife's eyes for fear her bitterness would be greater than his own, but Greta only said: "The old saddle shed is still standing. It will keep the rain off us while you snake logs from the hills to build another house."

"Can I help, daddy?" demanded Danny. "Can I hold the boards while you saw 'em?"

AND so it was decided, for how could a man lose with such partners to side him? But the odds were great, Steve soon discovered. In Flintlock the next day most merchants refused to do business with him though some, newcomers, grudgingly sold to him on a strictly cash basis. He fetched home tools, saddle horses and a secondhand buckboard heaped high with supplies, but his store of money had dwindled considerably.

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In the many times Steve visited Flintlock during the following weeks he found that men studiously avoided him, while the three Ludlows made no bones about their open hatred for him.

None of which gave Steve any grave concern, for he was wearing his gun now, and if the Ludlows or anyone else wanted to challenge him, he was ready. But it rankled to see little Danny treated like a pariah at the crossroads school where Steve took him each day, and Greta snubbed by women she'd grown up with. Yet in a sense Steve couldn't blame these people for their animosity, for the failure of Dan Anthony's bank had blasted many hopes beyond repair.

Shuffle McGinnis rode to the ranch one night, greeting his daughter in an abashed fashion and watching young Danny with hungry eyes. He visited them often after that, always surreptitiously, a craven creature who had never called his soul his own, and Steve wondered how his daughter came by the courage that was hers.

Shuffle was there the night the house was pronounced finished.

"Ought to be a housewarmin'," the old fellow said wistfully.

Whereupon Steve and Greta fell silent, for they remembered such things from other days—laughing neighbors, violins scraping far into the night and the joy that comes when work shared together is completed.

"Some day," Steve promised.

But the next day the two things happened that were to change the whole course of Steve Anthony's life here on Flintlock range.

First there was the finding of the cattle tracks. At dawn Steve had headed into the hills, exploring his spread with an eye to the future erection of fences. Thus he stumbled upon sign that told him cattle had been hazed across his land. Only a few critters, he judged, and the trail pointed north. But before noon he found many such trails, all of them converging toward the mouth of a canyon known in the old days as Lost Horse Gulch.

Someone was using his ranch as a thoroughfare into the hills. In a way, that was natural enough since the Boxed A was the back door to the high country. But who wanted cattle hazed into that no man's land, Steve wondered? It was a matter worth investigating, but such a trip might require a pack horse and supplies. He turned back to the ranchhouse, arriving to find Greta smoke-begrimed and disheveled and one wing of the new house a charred ruin.

"I didn't see who fired it!" Greta cried, sobbing as Steve held her. "They must have sneaked up on foot. But I smelled smoke in time to get enough water from the well to put it out. Oh, Steve, why won't they leave us in peace?"

There was no reply Steve could make, but his jaw grew tighter as he looked upon that near ruin, and at last he spoke. "We build 'em—they burn 'em!" he said bitterly. "And what could I prove if I carried the war to the Ludlows? Greta, load our things in the buckboard. I'm going down to the school and get Danny. We're lookin' for new range!"

"But, Steve—" she began to protest.

"No!" he said emphatically. "Do you remember the hard years after we were driven out of Flintlock before? I owe you and Danny a living. The money dad left me is mine, rightfully, because he stole nothing from these people. That money

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will give us a start some place else, even though we'll have to buy land and build a herd as best we can. Here it would be thrown away. It's yours, Greta, and Danny's that money. We owe it to the boy to build a home that won't be burned whenever our backs are turned!"

SPEECH still trembled on Greta's lips, but she checked it. Steve saw her turn into the house, stooped and worn, as he stepped up into his saddle. Then he was galloping toward the school, a beaten man. With fist and gun he could fight, but the thing that had beaten him here was intangible, made of the bitterness of men.

Thus he came to the schoolhouse to see the second thing that was to make this day a turning point for him. The dismissal bell had tolled, and Steve looked around for Danny who always sat forlornly waiting for him while other boys paired off to head for home. But now Danny was lustily swinging his fists at a boy half a head taller than himself, Pug Lafferty, grandson of old Hank Lafferty. As a fight, it was something of a shambles, because Danny had bitten off a great deal more than he could chew.

Steve and the schoolteacher reached the fracas at the same time, each hauling away a combatant.

"What is this?" Steve demanded sharply.

"He called you names!" Danny sobbed. "He said you was behind the rustlin' that's been going on lately. He said folks was likely to have a look-see at our spread pretty soon for their stolen critters!"

"Grandpap's fed up!" Pug Lafferty raged, trying to break away from the teacher. "Beef's been disappearin' and you're the gent that's hazin' it off. Grandpap says, 'Once an Anthony, always an Anthony.' "

Not much of this made sense to Steve at first. He had known nothing about any rustling—but then how could he? No man ever spoke to him. But all of Pug's wild babbling fitted in with the finding of those tracks pointing toward Lost Horse Gulch. Rustlers had been hazing stolen stock into the hills, and the ranchers suspected him, Steve Anthony, of doing the stealing. Which was just another reason for quitting this range! A man was accused, tried and convicted without a chance to speak in his own defense! Yet here in the schoolyard Steve had learned that he couldn't leave.

No; Pug Lafferty's words had changed all that. "Once an Anthony, always an Anthony," he'd quoted. Yet the Anthony name had stood for integrity upon this range in the long-gone days before Daniel Anthony's bank had failed. And here was another Daniel Anthony squirming in Steve's arms, bloody from defending that name.

Steve had wanted to build some sort of heritage for his son, something that would be safe from torch-wielding skulkers. But now he knew he must build something far greater for Danny—a name to be proud of. Running wouldn't work. Here on Flintlock range the name of Anthony had been defiled. Here on this range it must be made honorable again. That was the heritage Steve knew he really owed Danny.

"Son, you're walking home tonight," Steve said now. "Tell your mother not to bother packing our things. Tell her we're staying here, savvy? Your daddy's got to go into town. I'll be home soon as I can."

Then Steve was stepping up into the saddle again, pointing his horse

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toward Flintlock, a fierce elation within him as he rode along. Now he knew what his course must be, and now he knew how to redeem the Anthony name upon this range.

The rustled stock was back in Lost Horse Gulch, and Steve would tell the cattlemen so. More than that, he'd ride with them to recover those cattle, even though he had no stock of his own and therefore nothing personal to gain. That didn't matter. He'd be gaining their confidence, riding stirrup to stirrup with them, sharing their danger if a rustler force challenged them in the canyon.

Yet there would be some like the Ludlow brothers who would listen to no proposal Steve might make. Therefore he was going to Flintlock first and tell his story to Martin Sloane, once his father's cashier, and the only man who had showed open sign of friendliness. Sloane would back up his story for him, urge the ranchers to give him a chance to prove himself.

SUCH was Steve's scheme and, turning it over in his mind, he found no flaw in it. Dusk had spread its purple powder over Flintlock when he racked his horse before the bank, but a light burned behind the drawn shade of Sloane's private office and the bank's front door was open. In the vast room of grilled partitions, Shuffle McGinnis, a shadow among shadows, plied a mop. Nodding at him, Steve stepped toward Sloane's office—and froze into immobility as a voice reached him through the partially opened door.

"Things is shapin' up fine," Beaut Ludlow opined in the room beyond. "If the fool don't run after us firin' his new house today, he likely ain't gonna be able to run. Most of the ranchers is just about convinced that he's doin' the cattle stealing. They'll ride against the Boxed A one of these days and wipe it out!"

"But don't overplay your hand!" Martin Sloane countered. "Some of the ranchers are meeting here in town tonight to decide what's to be done about the rustling. If they drive Anthony out, that's fine. But supposing they get back the cattle you boys have corralled up in Lost Horse? What good will it do me to have a vault full of mortgages then?"

"We're keepin' an ear to the ground, Mart." Cass Ludlow laughed. "If the sign says the ranchers are likely to ride onto Anthony's spread, we'll just haze that beef so far back into the hills that nobody'll find it. Don't worry about that!"

For a moment Steve Anthony stood paralyzed as the astounding truth hit him. Martin Sloane wasn't his friend! Martin Sloane was working hand in glove with the Ludlows to ruin him as part of a land steal gigantic in scope! Steve had heard enough to see the shape of a pattern, and the missing pieces weren't hard to fit in. A red rage overmastering him, he kicked the door open and lunged inside, his gun in his hand.

"Set tight, you double-dealing skunks!" he ordered. "And get those hands hoisted!"

Under different circumstances their surprise would have been ludicrous. The Ludlows were scattered about the room, Sloane seated behind his desk.

"Anthony!" the banker shouted. "Is this a holdup?"

"Don't bluff!" Steve said grimly. "You wanted me off the range, eh? And no wonder! Once I stocked the Boxed A and had a crew roam-

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ing the spread, you wouldn't be able to run stolen stuff across it and into the hills. And I was fool enough to figger that the only reason I was being burned out was because you Ludlows were still sore about dad's bank going busted! I didn't savvy until today!"

"Nonsense!" Sloane blustered, but his vehemence was forced. "Do you think I'd be mixed in anything as petty as cattle rustling?"

"No. You're playing for bigger game" Steve countered. "A vault full of mortgages, eh? You'd stand a chance of owning half the range if ranchers lost beef and couldn't lift those mortgages! And if I paid off dad's old accounts, the ranchers could get out of your grasp, too. But since I wouldn't quit the country you were going to make me the goat of this rustling deal! Now quit trying to lie out of it! I heard you talking, savvy?"

THE bluster suddenly went out of Martin Sloane, leaving him a beaten man. But the Ludlows retained some of their surety. Beaut laughed raspingly.

"What do you aim to do about it, Anthony?" he demanded.

"A little gun thunder here at the bank ought to empty the meeting hall in a hurry and fetch the cattlemen here," Steve said. "When they come runnin', I'll have something to tell 'em."

Crossing to the window, he hoisted the sash and fired twice at the sky. And that was the moment the Ludlows chose to jump him.

It was a desperate move, but they had timed it efficiently. Steve, firing from the window, had been temporarily off guard. At the sudden scraping of a boot sole he spun, alert to danger, but the brothers were upon him. He managed to fire once, a wild shot, and then they were wrenching the gun away from him, hurling it away, driving him into a corner with fists that worked like pistons. Steve was there, panting and reeling, when the cattlemen stormed into the bank, old Hank Lafferty leading them.

"What's the shootin' for?" demanded Lafferty. "What's goin' on here?"

"A little trouble with Steve Anthony, boys," Martin Sloane spoke up quickly. "He had a hide-out gun, but we got it away from him. You see, the Ludlows just fetched Anthony into town, and they brought him here first to talk things over with me. Beaut was afraid there might be lynch talk when the news got out. He was asking me if it might not be best to keep quiet about this until the sheriff could get Anthony to a calaboose in some other town."

"You mean—" Lafferty began.

Sloane nodded. "Yes, Anthony's been doing the rustling, just as some of you suspected. The Ludlows, here, were losing beef the same as the rest of you. They caught Anthony hazing some critters toward his spread. Probably the other stolen stuff has gone that way too."

The audacity of the man left Steve breathless. By his boldness Sloane had neatly turned the tables on him. Anything Steve might say now would sound like a weak attempt to lie his way out of this predicament. Yet a torrent of words burst from him.

"It's a frame-up!" he shouted. "The stolen beef is in Lost Horse Gulch. I cut sign on it today. But the Ludlows fetched it there, workin' in cahoots with Sloane to keep you boys from payin' off your mortgages. I heard 'em talkin' about it

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tonight. Don't you understand? They're the rustlers!"

Martin Sloane smiled. "Did you ever hear such a wild yarn?" he asked. "Next he'll be accusing you fellows of rustling your own beef!"

"You can bet the sheriff ain't gonna have a chance at him!" growled one of the ranchers. "Rope law takes care of cow rustlers on this man's range!"

There was more that Steve might have said, but suddenly he had no will to say it, for speech would avail him nothing, anyway. He was beaten—beaten by the machinations of Martin Sloane and the hatred this range bore anyone named Anthony, a hatred Sloane had undoubtedly encouraged in his own sly way. Steve could see Shuffle McGinnis peering through the doorway now. The oldster might have heard what was said here before the ranchers came, but Steve's flaring hope died quickly. He could count on no help from a man who had never called his soul his own. And yet—

"It's the truth Steve's telling!" Shuffle spoke up. "Every bit of it. I know, gents. This ain't the first night-time meeting Sloane has had with the Ludlows. And this ain't the first dirty work Sloane has been mixed in!"

IT swung every eye toward the old janitor, and no man here was more surprised than Steve Anthony.

"Sloane never worried much about whether I overheard him schemin'!" Shuffle babbled on. "He didn't figger I'd ever have the guts to talk, anyway! But he's behind the rustlin', I tell you, just like Steve said!"

"He's lying!" shouted Sloane. "Greta Anthony is his girl. He's just trying to save this wide-looping son-in-law of his"

"Lying, am I!" Shuffle countered. "I was janitor when Dan Anthony had this bank, too, remember. Many a night you came back to work on the books, Sloane, while I was doing the swamping. Sometimes I thought I saw you tote canvas currency sacks out of here. When the bank went bust, I caught on. You were embezzling from Dan Anthony, but he was more cowman than banker and he never got wise! Then folks got set to lynch Dan, and I kept quiet. I didn't have the nerve to get mixed into a deal where a lynch rope was concerned. But Dan's old books are still here—the books you kept for him, Sloane. I dare you to let somebody that savvies such look 'em over!"

Perhaps Sloane would have tried to bluff through. Perhaps he would have succeeded. But Cass Ludlow went for his gun then, spearing a shot that slammed Shuffle backward. The other Ludlows were going for guns, too, and Steve fell sideways to the floor, rolling toward his own gun which lay there. There were only three bullets in the weapon now, he remembered, and he used one of them to smash Cass Ludlow, dumping him in a sprawled heap.

Lead was grooving the floor, driving splinters into Steve's face, but he was making his own bullets count. He had to. The need was for a fighter now, he reflected grimly, for Shuffle had done all that such a man could do. Steve saw Beaut Ludlow's knees buckle beneath him, but Sim was still triggering. Something knifed along Steve's ribs leaving fire and agony in its wake. His last bullet broke Sim's gun arm. Then, only faintly aware that the ranchers had drawn irons, too,

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Steve instinctively swung his empty gun toward Martin Sloane.

"D-don't shoot!" the banker quavered. "I'll make restitution! Don't shoot!"

Hank Lafferty was among those who crowded forward to lift Steve to his feet.

"Anthony," the old cowman said shamefacedly, "it sort o' looks like us jiggers made a mistake all along!"

"That's done and over with," said Steve. "Help Shuffle."

There was blood on the janitor's shoulder, but the wound wasn't serious.

"Shuffle," Steve said gently as he examined the man, "I'm apologizin' for things I've thought. You've got nerve and plenty of it."

"*Nerve!*" gasped Shuffle. "Where do you suppose I got the nerve to finally speak up—something I should have done years back? I borryed it from you, Steve. When I saw the nerve you had, stickin' on this range with every man against you, stickin' for Greta and Danny, I figgered I could be part of the man you was!"

And here Steve sensed an ironic working of destiny, for he had had his courage bolstered by his son in the schoolyard this afternoon, and Shuffle, in turn, had learned from him. Yet the greatest courage of all belonged to still another person, and she was here, darting through the doorway, her hair flying.

"Steve! Steve!" she cried. "The schoolteacher brought Danny home on her horse and told me you'd gone to town. I rode as fast as I could, Steve. You were so bitter when you left me that I didn't know what kind of trouble you might get yourself into."

"There'll be no more trouble for us, Greta," Steve said. "Ever."

HOURS later when little Danny had been put to bed, a piece of beefsteak tied over one swollen eye, Steve and Greta sat on the doorstep of the new house.

"A good finish," Steve observed. "Martin Sloane keeping himself from being lynched by offering to square up all around means that dad's name is cleared and the debt is paid. We'll be able to stock the spread and build it up. And, Greta, I'm wondering if you knew all along, somehow, that there could be this kind of an ending. Is that why you kept me from leaving from the very first?"

"No, Steve," Greta said softly. "There was a better reason. Dad—Shuffle. He was a mighty poor excuse for a father, but I could pity his weakness. Up until tonight he side-stepped trouble all his life, never meeting it squarely. Can't you see, Steve? It didn't matter what happened to us here so long as you faced it instead of running. I knew what my mother suffered, Steve. I didn't want my life to be bound up with a man who ran from trouble. Even though you only wanted to run for Danny's sake, and mine."

He fell silent, feeling both humble and strong. "The ranchers gave us an escort of honor, riding home with us tonight," he said at last. "I'm helpin' them haze their stock out of Lost Horse. They'll be fine neighbors, Greta, and they'll ride this way often."

"Yes," she said and smiled. "They're coming to help us rebuild the wing that the Ludlows fired today. And for the housewarming afterward."

THE END.

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Lead tore at Ben, but he was hardly conscious of pain as he struggled to make his last bullet take deadly toll.

DIM-TRAIL DESTINY

by Wayne D. Overholser

BEN ESTEY took one step away from the bar in Del Rickert's Bonanza Saloon, and stood so that he faced Rickert squarely. A man can stand only so much, and the patches of dull red on Ben's sun-browned cheeks showed he had reached the point where he wasn't going to stand much more.

"Rickert, you've been hoorawing me in that silky way of yours ever since I sloped into Wagonspoke," Ben said. "If you're aiming to work into a gun ruckus, now's as good a time as any."

"You got me wrong, marshal," Rickert said smoothly, and turning to the bar, casually poured himself

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a drink. "I'm not looking for no trouble with you. I'm just saying that it's mighty funny nobody knows anything about where you came from and who you are. That's not hoorawing you, is it, marshal?"

Ben fingered the star on his shirt front, and for a moment didn't answer. Del Rickert was the only person in Wagonspoke who had ever shown any curiosity about what lay behind Ben Estey. It was a long trail with some loops that Ben would have liked to forget, but there could be no forgetting. Still, he'd paid in full for what he had done, and it should make no difference to Del Rickert if the decent people of Wagonspoke had made an ex-outlaw their town marshal.

"I can't just see that it's any of your business where I came from or what I did," Ben said finally. "The day I rode into town, I caught one of your gamblers dealing crooked. I plugged him and then had to take on your top gun hand. Reckon that was enough to make the folks of this town think I'd make a good marshal."

"Which is plenty of reason for me wanting to know how come you're so handy with an iron," snarled Rickert, his pretended courtesy dropping away from him.

"And it also explains why you keep trying to rawhide me into going wild," Ben snapped back. "If we're gonna gun it out, you're making the first move. Go ahead."

Rickert grinned evilly under his carefully trimmed mustache. "Not me, marshal. I'll get you all right. That's a promise, but not today. I'll let you and the new preacher run the town for a while yet."

"I reckon we can do it, and I'll keep that promise in mind, only I hate to have a rattlesnake underfoot."

"A rattlesnake gives a warning, my friend," Rickert said. The smile had gone from his well-groomed face, leaving it hard and utterly merciless. "I never give a warning, which proves I ain't a rattlesnake."

"I'll remember that, too," Ben said. He strode past Rickert and into the afternoon sunshine.

AS Ben Estey walked the block to the town jail, he cursed himself for staying in Wagonspoke. Some day the past would catch up with him. He couldn't expect anything else, for Oregon wasn't very far from Montana. At first he'd told himself it didn't make any difference. If Wagonspoke found out, and told him a man with his past shouldn't wear a star, he'd saddle up his sorrel and mosey on. Only now he couldn't do that, for he'd met June Madden.

Ben sat down on the steps in front of the jail, the westering sun full upon his lean face, and cursed himself again. This was the way it would always be, this black shadow from yesterday that rose up out of the past and blotted out his chance at happiness.

A crowd was gathering in front of the hotel. Ben noticed, and remembered that this was the day the new preacher was to come to Wagonspoke. There had been talk of building a church. If the new preacher were good, he might divert enough money from Del Rickert's gambling tables to put up the building.

"Wake up, Ben," a jovial voice cut across Ben's thoughts. "This ain't the time nor the place to take a nap."

Ben looked up into the grinning faces of Buck Tully and Gabe Mather. Tully owned the biggest store in town and Mather ran the

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restaurant on the other side of the Bonanza. Both were officers in the church, and Ben guessed they were on their way to welcome the preacher.

"Who's napping?" Ben asked a little irritably. "Nothing to do. Reckon I'm cheating the town every time I draw my wages."

"It's a sight quieter than when you took the star," Tully grunted.

"Come along and shake hands with the preacher," said Mather.

Ben hesitated, and Tully laughed. "Let him alone, Gabe. June'll bring him."

The two men walked on toward the hotel. A minute later June came out of Tully's store and crossed the street to where Ben was sitting.

"You're not staying here and missing the preacher, are you?" she smiled.

Ben stood up. "To be real honest, June, I don't give a hang about seeing the preacher, but I wouldn't miss a chance to walk with the prettiest girl in Wagonspoke."

"Thank you." June curtsied and blushed. "You talk as if you didn't get a chance to walk with me every day."

"Not often enough," he said soberly, and fell into step beside her.

She was a shapely girl, and tall, this June Madden, almost as tall as Ben. It seemed to him, as he looked at her, that her eyes were like two blue diamonds set under a raven's wing. There was nothing more in a woman that a man could ask, and, Ben thought bitterly, she was the reason for him tarrying in Wagonspoke, this girl whom he could never ask to be his wife.

"The preacher's come a long way," June remarked. "I hope he likes it here. We can't go on meeting in the room back of Tully's store. It's been full the last three Sundays and we didn't even have a preacher."

"Where's he from?" Ben asked carelessly.

"Montana. Miles City, I think."

The words brought an unintelligible sound from Ben's lips. Miles City was where he had been raised. He'd lived there until his one misstep had sent him to Deerlodge.

"What did you say?" June shot him a quick glance.

"Nothing," Ben said hastily. "I was just wondering what his name was."

"John Clay."

Clay! A quick spasm of fear shot through Ben. He'd known a Clay in Miles City. Pres Clay, the double-crossing coyote who had been the cause of Ben going to Deerlodge. He'd had a brother who was a preacher. Just now Ben couldn't remember the man's first name, but it might have been John.

"I've been thinking about giving up my star," Ben announced suddenly. "Not much need for a town marshal now."

"Ben, you wouldn't do that?" June gripped his arm, paying no heed to the curious stares of the people in front of the hotel.

Ben knew what she meant, knew the question that was in her eyes, yet he couldn't tell her why he should leave town any more than he could tell her why he'd never asked her to marry him.

"Just seems like a waste of the town's good money," he said with pretended carelessness. "I've been here quite a while for me."

June didn't say anything. Just stood staring at him with a sad expression in her eyes that cut his heart. Then somebody yelled: "Here she comes."

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THERE was the jangle of chain traces, the sound of wheels and the crack of the driver's whip as the big stage careened down the street and creaked to a stop in front of the hotel.

"There's your preacher man," Ben said, and June turned her eyes toward the stage.

"Welcome to Wagonspoke," Buck Tully shouted, and hurried to shake the preacher's hand.

Then Ben's heart seemed to stop. The big man emerging from the stage was Pres Clay, and he was no preacher.

"Mighty glad to be here," Clay boomed in a ministerial tone. "Mighty glad to come to such a fine town where I know the Lord is blessing your work."

"He's a fine-looking man, isn't he, Ben?" June whispered.

"Yeah," Ben muttered, and felt sick.

Clay was shaking hands with Gabe Mather. Others were crowding around him.

"Come on, Ben," June urged. "We want to shake hands with him."

"You go ahead. I'll just stay here." Ben pushed June forward and backed away to stand against the wall of the hotel.

This man looked like a preacher, clad in a black suit, white shirt, string tie, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat. He had the air of one, yet Ben knew he wasn't mistaken. This was Pres Clay, and he hadn't come to Wagonspoke for any good purpose.

His enmity with Del Rickert, his love for June, his fear that the past would catch up with him all dropped away from Ben's mind. Instead he was gripped by the one thought that he was the only man who knew the truth. But how could he tell these people? Then the full impact of his task came to him. They wouldn't believe him. If he did speak the truth, Clay would ask them if they could believe the words of an ex-convict? He could say his brother in Miles City had told him about Ben Estey. That name was all too well known around that part of Montana.

No, there was but one thing to do. Wait and see what the pseudo preacher's game was. Then he'd figure out some way to block it.

June was shaking hands with Clay now, and Ben heard Buck Tully say: "This is your organist, Brother Clay. She does a mighty nice job, too."

"I'm sure she does." Clay bowed.

"Ben," June called, "come here and meet Mr. Clay."

There was nothing for Ben to do but to make his way through the crowd and face Pres Clay. He met the man's eyes squarely, saw the sudden flicker of interest, and that was all.

"Ben's our town marshal," June was saying.

Clay held out his hand. "I didn't catch the name." His dark eyes locked with Ben's. They seemed to be saying: "Don't let on, Ben, and I'll do the same."

"Estey," Ben said.

"Estey." Clay nodded. "Seems like I've heard the name."

There was no mistaking the unspoken threat. Clay knew a town like Wagonspoke wouldn't knowingly hire an ex-convict for its marshal.

"Why," Tully said, "I believe I mentioned Ben in my letter to you, Brother Clay. I remember telling you we had a law-abiding town, and that our marshal had made it that way."

"Oh, yes." Clay nodded genially. "Yes, indeed."

Ben dropped back then, and Tully

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went on with the introductions.

"Did you leave some groceries in Buck's store?" Ben asked June. He needed time to think.

"Why, yes," June said hesitantly.

"I'll pick them up for you and take them to your house."

June smiled. "I'll go along. That boy of Buck's doesn't always give me what I want."

BEN didn't say anything as they walked back to the store, picked up the groceries and went on to June's house. He listened absent-mindedly to the girl's talk about what the church could do with a full-time minister in Wagonspoke, and the building they hoped to erect.

"There's no reason why we can't have a beautiful church," June said fiercely. "There's lots of money in this valley. If it just wasn't for Del Rickert."

"A cow town like Wagonspoke always has a Rickert," Ben answered. "I reckon he's no worse than most as long as he knows what he can do and what he can't."

Ben followed June into her house, nodded at her invalided father who sat in his wheel chair beside the window, and went on into the kitchen.

"Thanks, Ben, for being my pack horse," June smiled as he laid the groceries on the kitchen table.

"It's a pleasure, ma'am," he grinned.

"Won't you stay for supper?"

"Reckon I better not," Ben said regretfully. "I'll eat at Mather's restaurant. Had a little set to with Rickert just before the stage got in, so I think I'd better spend some time in the Bonanza tonight just to show Del he didn't buffalo me."

June followed Ben through the house to the front porch.

"Ben." She caught his arm. "What did you mean by saying you were thinking of turning your star in?"

"Why, it's just like I said. I've done my job here. A gent like me just has to keep moving. A rolling stone gathers no moss. You wouldn't want to see moss growing all over me, would you, June?"

The girl didn't smile. "Rickert's here, and Zane Canfield's still hanging around. As soon as you go, there'll be trouble again. Killings, crooked gambling, and all the things that went on before you came. Don't go, Ben—please."

Ben looked at June, and he didn't dare let himself speak. The sun was almost down now, and its crimson glow painted high lights in the girl's ebony hair. It was a picture he would carry with him as long as he lived.

"I had hoped you could find something here to stay for," June whispered.

"I have," said Ben softly. "More than any man could ask. You are that something, June, but you don't know anything about me except the few months I've been in Wagonspoke. I want to be fair, and I wouldn't be if I stayed because I know what's behind me."

"You are fair," she told him. "Just thinking of it that way."

"I'll stay a while because there's one piece of business I have to take care of before I go."

Ben turned then, quickly, and hurried down the path to the street. He didn't dare look back, for he knew June would be standing there gazing after him, that deep hurt look in her blue eyes, the hurt he could have taken away with a single word, the word he couldn't utter.

Ben Estey ate supper in Mather's restaurant, listened to Mather's talk about the fine appearance the new

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preacher made, and said nothing. Every word the restaurant man said proved how well Ben had figured it when he'd first seen Pres Clay. The decent folks of Wagonspoke wouldn't be in the mood to hear the truth about their new parson.

AFTER supper Ben stepped into the Bonanza for a drink. He stood behind Zane Canfield and for a time watched a stud game. Canfield was a nervous, slim-fingered man whom rumor said had once been a trick roper with a vaudeville troupe. Now he did nothing but gamble in the Bonanza, and he wasn't doing as well as he had in the old days when the town ran wide open.

Presently Rickert came in. Ben strode to the bar and ordered a beer. Rickert came up to him and said: "Reckon the preacher got in, all right."

"You're letting him alone, Rickert," Ben said bluntly. "There's talk of building a church. If I hear of you doing anything to stop it I'll see we have the showdown you didn't want this afternoon."

"Now, now, marshal," Rickert said in his silky way, "why should I stop it? I might even help them out a bit."

"I'll believe that when I see it," grunted Ben.

Ben went back to his position behind Canfield, watched the game for a time, then walked out into the night. He made his usual round of of the saloons, but it was a quiet evening. By ten o'clock he was back in his hotel room. As he unbuckled his gun belt and laid it on the bureau there was a knock on the door. Opening it, Ben stared into the mocking eyes of Pres Clay.

"I thought I'd call on you, Brother Estey," Clay smirked, and slipped through the half-open door. "It's quite a thing when an ex-convict lands himself a job as marshal and gets everybody to thinking he's as high and mighty as these lame brains think you are."

Ben shut the door. "How about a fake preacher? What do you want, Pres?"

"Just a little talk." Clay sat down and began to roll a smoke. "Didn't think I'd be crossing your trail again, did you, Ben?" Clay chuckled brutally. "When I got Tully's letter and read about some gun slick named Ben Estey that rode in and cleaned up the town, I knew you were my huckleberry. You should have changed your moniker, Ben."

"Don't figure on me coming in on any of your rotten schemes, Pres," Ben said evenly. He still stood against the door. "You talked me into one of them with your fine-sounding gab, but I'll never fall for another. And don't forget I'm marshal of this town."

"Sure, sure." Clay leered at Ben through the smoke from his cigarette. "But you won't be the minute I tell the folks of this burg where you've spent three of your last five years. I've got a hunch you'll be smart and play along with me. You see, Ben, I've been right busy since I got into town. Seems like you're mighty sweet on that purty black-haired gal that plays the organ."

"Leave June out of this," Ben rasped, and took a step toward his holstered gun on the bureau.

"I wouldn't try to get tough, Ben." Clay's voice lost its tone of pretended friendliness. "You'd have the devil of a time trying to explain a dead preacher."

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FOR a moment Ben stared at Clay. Then he shrugged wearily and sat down on the bed.

"Looks like you've got a bunch of aces in your hand. How'd you get in on this preacher business?"

"That's better," Clay said approvingly. "My brother John preached in southern Idaho. That's how Tully happened to hear about him. John got sick and came home. Tully wrote to Miles City and I opened the letter. John and me look enough alike that I can get by unless somebody that knew John well rides into town, and I aim to be gone before that happens. Sunday night we cash in. Are you going to be smart now and play along?"

"I'm in no position to argue, Pres. What's the game?"

"Sunday night we're putting on a meeting to raise money for the new church. Tully and some of the other folks have already talked it up so I won't have much to do. Tully and Mather are putting out a thousand bucks apiece. Looks like maybe we'll raise around ten thousand that night. You're going to be at the meeting and you'll take the dinero. We'll send somebody for the banker so he can open the safe. You'll start for the bank, only you'll cache the money and pretend you were held up. Then we'll split the take and I'll pull out on Monday after telling the church board I won't stay if we don't have a church. You can marry the gal, move on after a while and you'll have a stake to get started with somewhere else. How does it sound?"

Ben kept his voice free of the hatred that he felt for Pres Clay. "Sounds foolproof, like most of your schemes, Pres."

"I think so myself," Clay said genially. "Five thousand won't be bad for a few days' work." He stood up, and a quick glint of suspicion came into his dark eyes. "But don't get any ideas about tipping Tully or some of the others off, my friend," he said darkly. "An ex-con's word won't carry much force. And don't figure on trying to cheat me out of my cut, either. I hear that the pen in Salem is no improvement over Deerlodge."

This was the moment that Ben had to make his act good. He met Clay's gaze, and his voice was properly humble. "Like I said, Pres, you hold the big hand. I ain't hankering on trying one of their cells at Salem."

"That'll be a good thing to remember when you've got the dinero in your hands, Ben," Clay said warningly. At the door he turned. "And don't forget to be at the meeting Sunday night."

"I'll be there," Ben agreed, and that was one promise he meant to keep. As the door closed behind Pres Clay, it seemed to Ben that something unclean had gone out of the room.

It was Wednesday that Pres Clay came to Wagonspoke. For the rest of the week he made himself conspicuous around town, shaking hands with people, greeting them genially, hiring a horse at the livery stable and riding to the nearest ranches. He talked in glowing terms of the fine church that was to go up in Wagonspoke, the splendid thing it was for the community. He indicated plainly that he expected everybody to give generously, yet he put it in such a way that he gave nobody offense.

So Ben waited for the slip Clay was sure to make—only Clay didn't slip. Sunday morning Ben went to church. Surely, he thought, this was the time Pres Clay would give himself away, but once again he

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acted the part too well to arouse suspicion. He talked of the evening service, described in flowery words the place of worship that would grace Wagonspoke. He read his sermon, a good-enough one, and stolen, Ben surmised, from John Clay.

When evening came, Ben knew it still wasn't time for him to talk. The only course open to him was to play along, take the money, and see that it didn't fall into the hands of Pres Clay.

BY eight o'clock the room in the back of Tully's store was full. Ben took his seat near the back. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Del Rickert and Zane Canfield come in.

After the hymns had been sung, Clay made a dramatic appeal to the gathering to give freely. Then he said: "I've asked Marshal Estey to take charge of the money. From what I hear, he's the one man in Wagonspoke whom nobody would try to rob if they want to continue living. Tomorrow, the Lord willing, work will start on our house of worship. Come up to the front, Mr. Estey."

Ben saw June turn surprised eyes to him as he walked up the aisle, and he winced under the quick look of pleasure she gave him. If anything went wrong— Then Ben Estey's mouth tightened in a thin line. This was one time nothing was going wrong.

Clay handed Ben a sheet of paper and a pencil. "You know everybody, Mr. Estey," he said. "I'm going to ask you to keep a list of their names and donations. Now who'll be the first?"

"I'll give a thousand dollars," Buck Tulley called. Walking up the aisle, he laid the money on the table.

"Another thousand from me." Gabe Mather came behind Tully.

"Same here." Del Rickert waved a handful of bills as he followed Mather, and grinned as a sudden hush fell upon the crowd.

They came rapidly then, no donations as large, but the total mounted. Five hundred dollars, two hundred, and many gifts of one hundred. Ben slipped in five twenty-dollar bills that he had already marked with a pencil. Then it was over.

"Add it up, Mr. Estey," Clay called dramatically.

A moment later Ben held up the paper. "Ten thousand three hundred dollars," he said.

"This is a glorious night," Pres Clay intoned. "Tomorrow work will start. Now I know that Mr. Estey will sleep better if this money is deposited in the bank safe. Mr. Tully, I don't see the banker. Will you go to his home and ask him to open the safe so the money may be put away? Tell him the marshal will be there with the building fund as soon as the service is over."

Fifteen minutes later the last hymn had been sung. Clay helped Ben place the money in a bag. As Ben left the room he saw that Zane Canfield was gone. Rickert was saying loudly to Gabe Mather: "A lot of folks claim I don't support worthwhile things. Maybe now they'll see how wrong they are. I want to see Wagonspoke grow as much as anybody does, and I figure a good church will help."

Ben went into the moon-brightened darkness and followed the alley into Main Street, wondering what was really in Del Rickert's mind.

Something swished past Ben's head and jerked tight around his arms. A noose! He was hauled into the alley. He clawed frantically for his gun as he glimpsed the hood-covered head of a man. Then he

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was dragged off his feet.

In that one horrible instant Ben Estey knew his plans were shattered. The moneybag he clutched in his left hand wasn't going to the bank safe.

Ben lashed out with his feet. Heard a grunt of pain, a muffled curse. Then a gun barrel slashed down against his head. A thousand stars burst before his eyes, and he sank into a dull, aching sleep.

THE next thing Ben knew a dozen men were around him, cutting the ropes that held his arms.

"What happened, Ben?" Buck Tully was shaking him. "Where's the money?"

Ben got to his feet, weaving a little until the dizziness passed. For a moment he couldn't remember, then it came to him in a sweep of awful memory.

"Somebody roped me. Dragged me into the alley and slugged me."

"What happened?" Pres Clay was jamming his way toward Ben.

"The marshal was slugged. The money's gone," somebody said.

"I saw him disappear," Tully cut in. "I was just coming back to meet him. That was a loco idea, sending Ben off by himself."

For a second Clay stared at Ben with the look of a man gone suddenly mad. Then a lurid stream of curses burst from his lips. "This is your scheme to cheat me, Estey," he roared. "You got a man to help double-cross me. Well, you're not getting away with it, you damned jailbird!"

Clay's hand moved for a gun under his coat. Ben saw it, knew he didn't dare use his own gun, for a dozen men were packed solidly behind Clay. Hurling himself upon the fake preacher, he knocked the half-drawn gun from Clay's hand. Suddenly Tully woke up to what was going on and grabbed Clay.

"What's the matter with you, parson?" he shouted.

This was the slip Ben had been waiting for. These were the men who had given their money to build a church after listening to Pres Clay's hypocritical mouthings. They'd listen now.

"This isn't John Clay," Ben spoke rapidly. "It's his brother, Pres, that I used to know too well in Miles City. His brother's sick back home. Pres came down here to steal the money you men gave tonight."

"Who's going to believe an ex-con?" Clay flung at him, struggling in Tully's grip.

"What's this, Ben?" Mather asked in perplexity.

"That's right. I served a term in Deerlodge after Pres here gave me a talk about getting revenge. My father had been cheated out of his ranch by a banker. He killed himself. Pres talked me into holding up the bank, only he tipped off the sheriff so as to grab the reward money for a bank robber."

For a full minute no one spoke. Ben could feel these men making up their minds. This was a jury—as real a jury as he had faced in Miles City. Then Buck Tully decided it.

"Something about this gent didn't strike me quite right, him reading that sermon this morning, and getting his text balled up. Who do you reckon slugged you, Ben?"

"I don't know," Ben answered, warmth coming back into his heart. "But I've got a hunch. If I'm right, I'll get the dinero back. Better come along with me for witness."

Ben pushed past them into the street and strode toward the Bonanza, followed by Mather and Tully. He was playing a hunch, a wild hunch, but it tallied. Del

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Rickert wouldn't give money away he didn't figure on getting back. Zane Canfield had left the service ahead of Del, but the gambler had been there long enough to know what was planned.

THERE wasn't much of a crowd in the Bonanza as Ben pushed through the batwings; just a table of poker players, and Rickert and Canfield at the bar.

"Well, marshal," Rickert said smoothly when he saw Ben, "get the money put away?"

Ben crouched, and his words were like a tongue of flame. "You know damned well I didn't, Rickert. You had Canfield hold me up. I reckon that ten thousand dollars is in your safe."

"Why, you infernal liar," Rickert bellowed. "I ought to kill you for that."

"I reckon it was your way of trying to get me without giving warning like you said," Ben blazed. "I put some bills in that pile. They're marked, Rickert. If you're innocent, you'll let me look at your cash."

Rickert's face drained of color. This was the showdown that had been coming since the day Ben Estey had ridden into Wagonspoke, and it wasn't to his liking.

Zane Canfield went for his gun first. There was a scurry of movement as men sought cover. Then gun thunder ripped apart the pool of quiet.

Like a master of his craft, Ben brought his Colt up with blinding speed. Twice the hammer fell. Two slugs slammed Canfield back and draped him across the bar, six feet of lifeless flesh.

But Rickert had been given time to go into action. Lead drove into Ben's side, like a searing poker tearing through his middle. He triggered a shot at Rickert, feeling his strength flow from him in the gush of hot blood that warmed his hip and ran down his leg. He fell to his knees, still drawing back the hammer and letting it drop. Bullets droned past his ear. The floor weaved before him. He thumbed back the hammer again. One more bullet left in his gun. He waited for the second when Rickert would stand still, then he drove that last slug home. Del Rickert was done. Once more his Colt blazed, harmlessly this time as the slug gouged into the floor, then he toppled over and lay still.

Men were holding Ben. From far away came Buck Tully's voice: "Why didn't you tell us what you were up to, Ben? No use doing all this yourself."

"Look in . . . Rickert's safe. Some twenty . . . dollar . . . bills . . . marked," Ben whispered, and for the second time within the last half-hour he sank into the dark oblivion of unconsciousness.

It was hours later when Ben came to. He was in bed, but not in his hotel room.

"Lie still and don't talk." Ben recognized June Madden's voice, and heard in it a softness that had never been there before. "They found the money in Rickert's safe just like you said. Oh, Ben, I know now why you thought you couldn't stay. Didn't you know that wouldn't make any difference to me? Whatever you've done before that was wrong you've paid for a thousand times. We'll get another minister, Ben, a real one this time, and we'll have that church we've worked so hard for."

It was music, those words, words he had never thought he'd hear.

THE END

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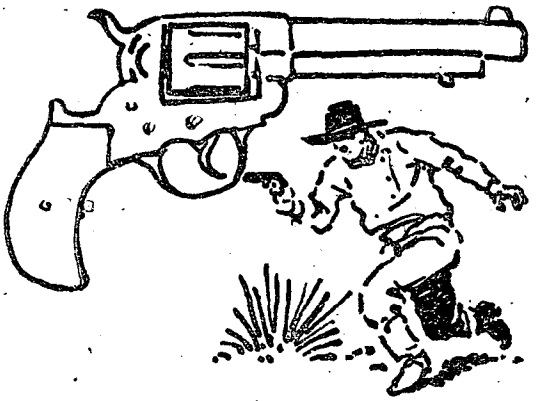

HAWGLEG HIST'RY

by S. Omar Barker

They asked me, "What's a hawgleg?" So I tried to figger out
Some way to make them savvy who have never faced its snout.
Of course, I could have told 'em it was just a word for "gun,"
But that ain't all its meanin' where the Western rivers run.
That nickname just describes its shape: the hind leg of a pig—
"Ol' equalizer's" better, for a runt can look as big
As any giant livin', with a hawgleg on his hip,
Just so he savvies shootin' quick—an' straight—without no slip.
Another name we used to hear was "cutter"—that's the truth—
Because it often cut old age plumb off right in its youth.
The calibers was forty-one an' forty-five an' -four,
Which means what size blue whistler come a-smokin' from its bore.
But calibers of bullets never settled nothin' when
The argument got smoky—'twas the calibers of men.
Sometimes some feller toted *two* to prove that he was tough,
But *one* could be aplenty if you drawed it quick enough.
"Blue lightnin'," "ol' persuader" are some other names I've heerd.
It also was a "tremble stick" in case you drawed it skeered.
A heap of men who've toted guns an' some that tote 'em still
Have never had to draw 'em on another man to kill.
But still they've always wore 'em, for the hawgleg is a stick
That when a feller needs it bad, he also needs it quick.

They asked me, "What's a hawgleg?" Well, I done my level best
To give 'em some idea of its meanin' in the West,
But on this horn of hist'ry please allow me one more toot:
Don't never draw nor point one if you don't intend to shoot!

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Jim was surprised to see MacAndrew's cabin door open and three men come striding out into the storm.

BLIZZARD PASEAR

by Hugh B. Cave

THE dogs had been bushed for hours, but still Jim Donley drove them on without a moment's rest. It hurt him to do that. He had raised two of the three Huskies from pups, and they were about the only friends he had left in the North Country. But if he stopped now, Matthew Kirk would overtake him.

Matt Kirk was the law, and Jim Donley had been running from the law for three days and four nights, almost without pause. Rage and bitterness had kept him going where another man might have sprawled down in the snow and prayed for death to give him rest.

Jim didn't fear death. He had faced it a score of times in his seven years of work in the wilderness. But

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to be run down by a killer masquerading in the uniform of law and justice, to be stalked and murdered by a man like Matt Kirk—that was different.

He looked back and shook his fist. His harsh voice spurred the dogs to greater speed.

"We'll stop," Jim muttered, "when we get to Henry Ferguson's old camp on Owl Lake. We'll make our stand there and have it out with Kirk, on even terms! Here in the open he'd shoot me down as easy as he'd rifle a rabbit—and with no more compunction, blast his twisted heart!"

The wind was increasing, and there was snow in it. The snow hid the gray ghosts of tamarack and dwarf pine that thrust bleakly up from the white desolation on all sides. The wind had an Arctic bite to it, and Jim shivered as its icy fingers clawed through his furs to chill the sweat on his young body.

The snow did something to his mind, too, for there had been a heavy fall the night of the murder, back at Two-head Lake, he recalled. The scene took shape again in his thoughts, as he stumbled on through the gathering dark.

It had haunted him, that scene, every step of his flight for freedom. He had gone over it time and again, searching in vain for some loophole in the evidence which had branded him a killer.

There wasn't any loophole. Jim knew that now. Matt Kirk had been too infernally clever!

But he went over the whole thing again, to keep his mind occupied. To keep from feeling the hunger cramps in his stomach and the vicious blast of the wind on his half-frozen face. He gripped his thoughts as fiercely as his mittened hands gripped the handles of the sled, and forced them back to the big room at the trading post, with heat pouring from the stove that glowed cherry-red in the corner, and old Sandy MacAndrew, the factor, sitting in his rocking chair and stolidly sucking away at his pipe.

THE factor had talked about Jim's future that night. "Me, son, I'm getting too old for this kind of life," he'd declared, rubbing away at the scrawny left leg that always bothered him in wet weather. "Come summer, I might as well pack up and clear out of here. You know the ropes now. You know furs. I don't think you'd let too many of these canny trappers outsmart you! You're young, too, and can stand this kind of life. How'd you like to be factor of the post here at Two-head?"

Jim had gazed at the old man long and hard. You never knew how to take MacAndrew. The old man's sense of humor was sometimes cruel and unpleasant.

"You've said all this before, Mr. MacAndrew, and nothing ever came of it."

"This time," MacAndrew declared, hitting the stove dead center with a stream of pipe juice, "I mean it. I've earned a softer job, son. Look at me! Ever since I caught this dang leg of mine in that wolf trap two years ago, it pains me so bad I can hardly hobble on it." He wedged his homemade crutch under his arm and with the aid of it, limped over to the stove to knock out his pipe. "You think it over. The job is yours if you want it."

For once the old man seemed to mean it. There weren't any sly devils of mischief in his eyes. He limped over to Jim's chair and gave the younger man a pat on the shoulders.

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"This time I'm not foolin', Jim," he said. "Now you give me a hand in to bed. Blast the wet weather!"

Jim put an arm around him and helped him into the adjoining room, then dropped to one knee and unlaced MacAndrew's boots. With his clothes off and his frail body incased in the long flannel nightgown which he habitually wore, the old man reached for his crutch and thrust it into Jim's hand.

"While you're thinking things over," he said, "you can be fixing this for me. It's come unwound where I patched it together last week."

Jim returned to the empty front room. Outside, snow fell in heavy, wet flakes. While he worked on the crutch, unwinding the fishline with which MacAndrew had bound the old break in it, Jim thought about the old man's promise and found it good. This time MacAndrew was probably not fooling.

Jim glanced at the alarm clock on the shelf above the stove. "Eight thirty," he mused, putting the crutch aside. "I could get over to Beaver River in two hours, and Molly would still be up. What am I waiting for?"

He hurried to the door and looked out at the weather. It was not too bad. There was a lot of snow, but not much wind. He pulled on his furs and shut the door quietly behind him. A few minutes later he was tramping on snowshoes over the frozen reach of the lake—on his way to Beaver River, where Molly Driscoll's father ran an independent trading post.

IT was Molly herself who opened the door of the Driscoll cabin when Jim knocked. She knew at once, just by the look of him, that he had something exciting to tell her, and her own eyes lit up in quick response as Jim gripped her arms. She was a slim, dark-haired girl of twenty, the prettiest, loveliest girl between Thunder Bay and the barren lands. And she was Jim Donley's sweetheart.

He told her, proudly, what MacAndrew had said. "I'm to be factor, Molly! I'll get a fine salary and a percentage of the profits. It's the very thing we've been waiting for all these months—and this time MacAndrew really means it. Will you share it with me?"

"Yes, Jim—oh, yes!" Molly whispered in a soft, breathless voice, and put her lips up to be kissed. Nothing else mattered, then; not even the voice of her father, Andy Driscoll, shouting from an inner room to demand what in tarnation they meant by stirring up such a commotion at that hour of night. Jim just put an arm around Molly and marched in to tell her father there was going to be a wedding.

The three of them had a quiet little celebration, then, and at one in the morning Jim started back to Two-head Lake. A wind had risen, and he had to fight his way through a storm that, by morning, would be really savage. He was a little surprised to see a light in MacAndrew's cabin as he neared the place.

He was even more surprised to see the cabin door open and three men come striding out into the storm, with flashlights that cut through the swirling snow like accusing yellow fingers.

Jim paused. The men saw him and came toward him. In the lead was Matthew Kirk, a swarthy trapper who represented all the law there was at Two-head Lake between the rare visits of the Mounted policeman who patrolled the region.

Matt Kirk strode up to Jim and shoved a .30-30 against his chest. "So you come back!" he snarled.

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"No doubt you've got a fancy alibi all figured out, and think we'll fall for it!"

Jim didn't know what to make of the man, or of the other two who closed in at Kirk's command and seized his arms. Kirk, of course, was the law—only a deputy, but still powerful. The other two were trappers who had brought in a sled load of furs a week ago and were bunking in one of MacAndrew's spare cabins before starting back to their trap lines. With MacAndrew himself, these three men represented the total population of Two-head at the moment.

They marched Jim to the cabin, and Kirk ordered him to sit. Jim sat. Then he saw what lay there on the floor, just back of the door, and got up again. He knelt beside MacAndrew's body—that frail, thin body with its flannel nightgown covered with blood—then looked up at Kirk.

"Who . . . who did it?" he asked in a hoarse whisper. "Who killed him?"

"You know well enough who killed him!" Kirk replied savagely.

THEN it came out, the whole ugly business, colored by Matt Kirk's blackest epithets. There was nothing Jim could do about it. He had been framed for a murder, and he knew who had done the framing; but in the eyes of these other men, Matt Kirk was the law, and Kirk's word had weight.

"MacAndrew promised you the job of factor," Kirk thundered. "I was out back of the cabin, looking after my dogs, and I heard every word of it. Said he was through here, and swore he meant it. This time you believed him. Then he laughed at you, same as he's done before. You didn't reply to that laugh, Donley, but your face turned white and your hands shook. You helped MacAndrew to his bed—I watched you through the window—and then you grabbed up your rifle and went out."

"That's a lie!" Jim protested hoarsely.

"It's the truth and you know it!"

"I went out to visit Molly Driscoll. And I took no rifle. My gun is in my room!"

"Is it?" Kirk countered. "That's *your* story, Donley. I know what you did, for I watched you. You grabbed up your rifle and went striding down to the edge of the lake. You waited there a while—ten or fifteen minutes—and then crept back to the cabin. You stood there outside the cabin, near the door, and called MacAndrew's name. Called it two or three times, to wake him. I heard you. If I'd guessed what you were up to—"

"I went to Molly Driscoll's. I can prove it!"

"Can you?" Kirk snapped. "Then you went there afterward. *Before* you went, Donley, you called MacAndrew to the door of this cabin and shot him down in cold blood. I'd have put a bullet through your heart as you ran, if my gun had been handy. But you were too quick for me."

Well, there it was. A more vicious string of lies had never been heaped on an innocent man's head. But Matt Kirk had seen the murder with his own eyes, hadn't he? A cold-blooded killing, inspired by bitterness and disappointment. And these other men believed him.

"In the morning," Kirk said, while the other two men made Jim Donley fast to his chair with ropes, "we'll start for the police post. With this, Donley, for evidence." And he reached behind him to lift Jim's rifle from the table.

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The rifle was water streaked, where snow had melted on it. "I've got a written statement from Travers and Gendron, here," Kirk added, "that this gun was found in the snow near the edge of the lake, where you dropped it while running away."

Jim was silent. Argument would get him nowhere, he knew. What he could not figure out was why Matt Kirk had done this to him. Did Kirk want the job at Two-head?

Travers and Gendron carried the body of old Sandy MacAndrew into the adjoining room and laid it on the floor. Then they went back to their own cabin, leaving Kirk and Jim alone. Trussed hand and foot, Jim stared at the big man in bitter silence for a while, then asked in a low voice: "Why did you do it, Kirk? What's behind all this?"

Kirk paused at the entrance to Jim's room and turned slowly. His smile was as twisted as his heart. "You'd like to know, eh?" he replied.

"When a man is framed for murder, he usually likes to know why, Kirk!"

"Well, now," Kirk jeered, "maybe some day I'll tell you." Turning, he strode into the room. A short while later he was asleep on Jim's cot.

JIM went to work. The two trappers had bound him securely, and there seemed little chance of his getting loose, but even when his wrists were red with blood and his body soaked with sweat, he refused to give up. The specter of being tried for murder drove him on. Hatred of Matt Kirk gave him strength. Just before dawn he worked the last coil of rope from his legs and stood up.

His rifle was in his room, close to Kirk's hand. The trappers own gun was in there, too. Jim could not risk an attempt to reach them. He tiptoed out of the cabin and tramped around back, through the deep snow, to unchain his dogs and harness them to his sled. They were good dogs. His warning whisper kept them quiet, and in five minutes he was ready. As the Two-head post slipped into the dark behind him, he turned just once to shake his fist.

"We're not through yet, Matt Kirk!" he said through his teeth.

Daylight found him skirting the west shore of the lake, and for a time he was sorely tempted to turn south. If he could stop at the Driscoll cabin for just a few minutes—just long enough to tell Molly the truth of what had happened—she would never believe Matt Kirk's lies. But it was not safe. Time was too precious.

"But I'll be back, Molly," he whispered. "Wait for me! I'll be coming back!"

The storm had blown itself out, and by noon the sun was a crimson fire in the sky. The fresh snow glittered like a sea of jewels, hurting Jim's eyes. At two in the afternoon he reached a trap-line camp on River Lake and loaded the sled with provisions that were stored there.

After that, he lost track of time and distance. He knew only that he was running away from a man he feared, and that he hoped to shake off pursuit in the trackless wilderness to the north. Then he might circle and work his way back to civilization, and begin to think. Somewhere in the ghastly thing which had happened to him there must be a way out. But before he could hunt for it, or even think about it, he had to outdistance Matt Kirk.

He discovered soon enough that Kirk was after him. As the country leveled out and the great stands of spruce and tamarack dwindled to a

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few gaunt sticks in the white waste, it was possible to see for miles behind. Toward noon of the third day Jim saw the moving black specks that were following his trail. A sled, four dogs, and a man. *Four* dogs to Jim's three.

He knew, then, that he was finished. Unless snow fell to obliterate his trail, the man behind would slowly but surely close the gap. He prayed for snow and his prayer was answered. Out of the north that night roared a blizzard.

Now, for endless hours, he had been plodding on in the teeth of this new, screaming terror, searching ahead for some landmark to tell him where he was. Ahead somewhere lay the crooked sweep of Owl Lake, on the shore of which old Henry Ferguson, one of MacAndrew's trappers, had once maintained a trap-line cabin. It was Jim's last hope. He and the dogs had tapped their last reserve of endurance.

"We've got to reach that cabin!" he groaned. "You hear me, Buck? You hear, don't you? We've got to get there!" He stumbled forward and sank to his knees beside Buck, his leader, and the dog seemed to understand.

JIM almost failed to recognize Owl Lake when he reached it, the snow was so deep and the storm so savage. His eyes were swollen half shut from the wind, and he almost went past the cabin without seeing it. As a matter of fact, he didn't see it. But the dogs had been there once before, and when they sensed the nearness of the place, they put forth a burst of energy, dragging Jim and the sled toward it.

He had hard work getting the door open. The winter's snow and ice had jammed it tight. For half an hour, dead on his feet, Jim worked at the barrier with his ax; then it yielded and he stumbled inside, pausing only long enough to loose the dogs from their harness so they could follow him.

He got a fire going in the stove, and after dragging in some provisions from the sled, cooked a meal. He and the dogs ate until they could hold no more. Then Jim sat—just sat—letting the heat of the fire thaw him out.

"All we can do now is wait," he declared. "Kirk will find us, all right. He's a stronger man than I am, and if we made it, he can, too."

He waited, with the door closed and the storm screaming around the cabin. It wasn't much of a place—just the one room, with a bunk, a table, a couple of rough chairs and the stove. The shelves above the table were bare, but the wood box was more than half full. Jim had hoped against hope that there might be a gun of some sort in the cabin, but there wasn't.

The storm got worse, if that was possible. At least, it sounded worse. The wind was an unceasing lynx scream. Snow was plastered inches thick to the outside of the shack's one small window, and Jim could not see out.

"We've got one chance," he said to the dogs, who were sprawled on the floor, near the stove, watching him. "By now the sled out there will be covered up with snow, and Kirk won't know for sure that we're here. He won't see the smoke from the chimney pipe—not at night, and in a storm like this—and he won't see any chinks of light through these walls. He may just walk in. If he does—"

Jim wondered if he could beat Kirk in a hand-to-hand fight. Probably not. But he was rested now,

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and Kirk would not be. There was a chance.

He sat there watching the door, listening to the shriek of the storm. The night crawled by. No one came. The storm abated. Daylight came, and Jim opened the door.

He saw something, then, that stiffened him and forced his eyes wide with amazement. Less than two hundred yards distant, a dog team was crawling through the white desolation toward him!

"Kirk!" Jim whispered.

He hadn't pictured it like this. He had expected Matt Kirk to come stalking him, with rifle ready for murder. But *this* Matt Krik was not stalking anyone. He was staggering blindly through the deep snow, reeling at every step, letting the dogs guide him as he clung feebly to the sled!

Jim strode forward. He was not afraid. He could tell at at glance that if Matt Kirk let go the sled handles to reach for his rifle, he would fall headlong. Resolutely Jim went up to him. Then he realized something else.

Kirk had not seen him coming and was not even aware of his presence. Kirk was blind!

FOR an instant Jim felt pity. He reached for the man and said quietly: "All right, Kirk, you're safe. I'll lead you." But at the sound of his voice the big man recoiled as if struck, then mouthed a sullen, bitter oath and tried to make a fight of it.

Jim avoided the rush with ease, but his pity vanished as he stepped aside. "All right," he said bitterly. "Swear your heart out! Turn your rotten soul inside you. See what it gets you!"

At the sound of his voice, Kirk turned again. Suffering and despair had evidently brought out the worst in the trapper. Even the best of him was bad, and this brief, savage exhibition of the worst filled Jim with loathing.

Kirk colored the air with his language. He hurled himself this way and that, frenziedly seeking to reach the younger man with his fists. At last his waning strength gave out and he sank to the snow, gasping for breath. When Jim bent over him he hadn't enough strength left to offer resistance.

Jim gripped him under the arms and dragged him into the cabin. Leaving him there, he went out again to take care of the dogs. He had more respect for Kirk's dogs than for the man himself. When he returned, Kirk was sprawled there flat on his back, asleep.

Jim knelt to examine him, paying particular attention to the man's eyes. They were crisscrossed with red veins and had the glazed look of frosted glass. The glittering sun must have started Kirk on his downfall. The terrible glare of the snow had seared his sight and the storm, with its needles of wind-driven snow, had finished the job. It would last a long while, too, and be painful. More than one man had lost his mind from the agony of such an affliction.

Jim forced some hot tea and broth into Kirk's mouth, then removed the man's boots and furs and laid him on the bunk. After that he sat, wondering what this unexpected turn of events might hold for him. Here, helpless, was the man who had framed him for murder, the one man who could clear him.

In about an hour Kirk came to. He sat up and his hands groped about on the bunk as though seeking to determine the nature of his surroundings. Then, as memory re-

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turned, he stiffened and looked straight ahead of him, those sightless eyes as blank as broken windows in an empty cabin. His mouth thinned and he said hoarsely: "Where are you, Donley?"

From a chair on the other side of the room, Jim replied quietly: "I'm handy, Kirk. And I've got a rifle aimed at you, so sit still!" That was not entirely true, but the rifle was leaning in the corner, within reach, if Jim needed it. He didn't think he would need it, but he had no desire to see Kirk lunging and staggering about the cabin in blind fury again.

"So . . . the tables are turned," Kirk said suddenly.

"And you're the one to do the talking, Kirk."

"Meaning what?"

"We're a long way from help," Jim reminded. "I could leave you here and keep on running from the murder you framed me for. If I do that, you'll die. You wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance of getting out of here alone. On the other hand, why should I take you back when there's a murder charge awaiting me?"

KIRK laughed. It was an ugly laugh and it must have hurt him, for he suddenly put his hands to his face and stopped laughing to curse the pain that stabbed him.

"Well, Donley?" he said finally.

"You framed me for that murder, Kirk. Why did you do it? For the job at Two-head?"

Kirk laughed again, low in his throat. "Not for the job, Donley. For the girl that went with it. She's all right, that Molly Driscoll. I've had my eye on her. With you out of the way—"

Jim felt a strange numbness in his hands and looked down at them. They were clenched so hard that the blood had stopped circulating.

"And I still want the girl," Kirk said. "If I can't have her, no one else will! Least of all, you!"

Jim got up to thrust a chunk of wood into the stove. Then, not because he expected it to work, but because he had to know just where he stood, he took a couple of steps toward the man on the bunk. "Kirk," he said grimly, "I'll take you back to Two-head Lake under one condition—that you write out a full confession!"

"Do I look stupid, Donley? A full confession would hang me!"

"Then I'll leave you here."

"All right, leave me here. But then you won't be going back to Two-head, either. You'll spend the rest of your life running from the law. No, Donley, that won't do." The big man leaned forward, resting his chin on his knuckles. "I'll strike a bargain with you."

Jim was silent.

"Take me back to Two-head," Kirk said, "and I'll change my story enough to save you from an outright murder charge. I'll say MacAndrew threatened you with a gun and you shot in self-defense. It won't be hard to put a story like that over, Donley. MacAndrew was a cranky old devil. For instance: You were going over to the Driscoll place against his orders. He cursed you as you left. He stood in the doorway and threatened to put a bullet in you. You had your own gun in your hands, hoping for a shot at some wolves as you crossed the lake, and when MacAndrew jerked his rifle up, you shot him."

Jim scowled a moment. "Making up lies seems to come easy to you. Do you expect anyone to believe that story?"

"I'm the law," Kirk reminded. "If

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I say I saw it, you'll go free."

"What about your other story?"

"Who heard it, except Travers and Gendron? They'll be out on their trap lines by the time we get back to Two-head. Of course"—Kirk's grin was crooked—"I don't think Molly Driscoll will believe it. I'll make sure she doesn't. She'll think I told this new story just to clear you of a murder charge, and she'll favor me all the more for being so generous."

Jim's hands were white again. He had trouble controlling them.

"Well, Donley?" said the man on the bunk.

"You're rotten to the core, Kirk!"

"But I've got the whip hand, and you know it. You'll come to terms, all right. To *my* terms." The big man grinned as he lay back on his bunk. "I may be blind and helpless," he concluded, "but I'm still top man, kid."

He was right, too. Fate had played a queer trick on Jim Donley, and Jim knew it. Here, utterly helpless, was the one man who could clear him of a charge that meant the loss of his future and the girl he loved. Yet Kirk was still giving the orders.

Or was he? After thinking it over, Jim was not so sure. If he took Kirk back, what assurance had he that Kirk would keep his end of the bargain? And even if the big man did keep his word, what then?

"I'd be through at Two-head, anyway," Jim thought, "and through with Molly. She wouldn't have any man with blood on his hands. Maybe I wouldn't have to run from the law any more, but that would be small consolation."

He drew a deep breath. "Kirk," he said, "you can shift for yourself before I'll agree to such a deal!"

"Hell, kid," Kirk grunted, "you're too hard to get along with. Or are you thinking of old MacAndrew? Forget MacAndrew. He was a sour old man and on his last legs, anyway."

"I wasn't thinking of him," Jim said bitterly, "but of—" Suddenly he was silent, and his eyes widened a little as he stared at his sightless companion. All at once he *was* thinking of MacAndrew.

A moment later he said quietly: "All right, Kirk, I'll take you back."

THEY left the following morning, after Matt Kirk had rested enough to be in shape for the trip. With seven dogs in harness and Jim's leader out front, the team was fast and strong. Kirk rode the sled, bundled in furs against a bitter wind that swept down from the barrens.

It was a strange journey. All during the first day Jim held the team to a swift pace, shouting them on, helping them when the snow was deep and the going too hard for them. That night he built a lean-to and kept a fire blazing before it to shut out the cold. Hardly a dozen words were exchanged between him and Matt Kirk.

The next day was the same—on and on at a steady, relentless clip, with only snatches of time out for food and rest. The man on the sled did not complain. He was comfortable and warm, and sure of himself. But Jim Donley drove the dogs and himself with a kind of fever. He did that because he wanted to get there and settle something. Everything he was, everything he hoped to be, hung on the outcome of this gamble of his, and he was impatient for the showdown.

About noon of the third day they came to a lake and a cabin.

"Well, Kirk," Jim said, "we're here."

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Kirk sat up, as though to search the surroundings with his bandaged eyes. "So soon?" he scowled.

"So soon," said Jim cryptically. The team halted before the cabin and he went striding toward the steps. The door opened, and a slim, well-built man stood there, wearing the uniform of the Mounted Police.

Jim stopped before him. "You're Corporal Hendy, aren't you?"

The man nodded, frowning at the sled, perhaps wondering at the bandage around the eyes of the man who sat there.

"I'm Jim Donley, from the post over at Two-head Lake."

"How are you, Donley?" the policeman said quietly and offered his hand. Evidently he had not heard.

"And this," said Jim, as he and Hendy walked toward the sled, "is Matt Kirk. You know him, I think. He's a deputy in the Two-head district. Matt's eyes have gone back on him, corporal. I've just brought him in from Owl Lake. He wants to tell you about the death of Sandy MacAndrew."

Hendy stiffened. "MacAndrew . . . dead?" he gasped.

Matt Kirk got off the sled and reached for Hendy's arm. His fingers found a grip and he steadied himself. "That's right," he said grimly. "MacAndrew is dead."

Jim was a little surprised at what happened then. He had expected Kirk to wait at least until they were inside the cabin, out of the wind. But no. Kirk didn't even pause to wonder why Jim had brought him here to the police post instead of returning to Two-head.

"Hendy," Kirk said savagely, "Sandy MacAndrew was murdered in cold blood, and here's the man who did it! He's under arrest. I'm turning him over to you!"

Jim was silent. He had expected this, but was shocked at the quickness of it. Corporal Hendy was surprised, too. He scowled at Jim, as though expecting some sort of denial. When Jim said nothing at all, the corporal shook his head a little and said: "All right, let's go inside."

INSIDE, Matt Kirk told his story. He didn't change it as he had promised. It was the same vicious string of lies. "And that's what happened," he declared, summing it up. "With my own eyes I saw this man call Sandy MacAndrew to the cabin door and then shoot him down in cold blood. Travers and Gendron will corroborate every statement I've made. They were with me when I picked up the gun. I've a signed statement of theirs back at Two-head."

Hendy looked at Jim. "Why did you come back here, Donley? It's hardly what I'd expect of a cold-blooded killer."

"That's easy," Kirk sneered. "I promised to go light on him. I let him think I'd stretch a few points to make it look as though he shot MacAndrew in self-defense."

Corporal Hendy gave Kirk a strange, dour look. "I see. You never intended to keep your word, of course?"

"Hell, no!"

"Well," the corporal said, "we'll go over to Two-head Lake and have a look at things." He stepped to a desk on the other side of the room, pulled out a drawer and turned around with handcuffs extended. Jim quietly thrust out his wrists.

It was a six-hour haul to Two-head Lake from the police post. The afternoon was over and darkness was blurring down when they arrived. A light glowed in the window of MacAndrew's cabin.

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The two trappers, Gendron and Travers, were surprised to see Hendy among their callers.

"We figured we'd wait around a day or two more," Travers explained, "for Kirk to get back, seein' as no one else was here to look after things. If you want to look at MacAndrew," he added, turning to Hendy, "we carried him out to the woodshed."

Corporal Hendy went out to the woodshed. When he returned, Jim, by the stove, was sitting in MacAndrew's favorite rocker. Kirk and the two trappers were seated, too, waiting for the corporal to get on with his questioning. There was a grim twist to Kirk's smile, and on Jim Donley's face was a pallor that told of the struggle within him. Soon, now, he would see the turn of the cards.

"Well, Hendy," Kirk said with a shrug, "these men will tell you that every word I've said is gospel truth. Go ahead and ask them!"

"Wait a minute," Jim said.

They turned toward him, and he leaned forward in his chair, gripping his knees with his manacled hands.

"According to your story, Kirk," Jim said then, keeping his voice steady despite the turmoil inside him, "you saw me help Mr. MacAndrew to his bed. Then I went out, grabbing my gun. I called MacAndrew and he got out of bed and came to the door—and I shot him. You've told that story twice now, Kirk, without changing it."

"I'll tell it a hundred times more, if necessary!" Kirk snarled.

"It won't be necessary," Jim said. All at once he felt relaxed and sure of himself, as though an iron band had been released around his heart. "Travers, you and Gendron were here earlier that day. You saw MacAndrew around, didn't you?"

Travers nodded.

"He used a crutch, didn't he?"

"That's right," Travers said slowly, with a wondering glance at Kirk. "Sandy couldn't move without that crutch of his. He cursed it plenty, but he had to have it."

"Have you touched that crutch since he was killed?"

"No-o-o. Don't believe I've even seen it."

"Well," Jim said, turning, "if MacAndrew got out of his bed to answer my call, and walked from his bed to the door of this cabin, maybe Matt Kirk can tell us why the old man left his crutch over there in the corner—*a full sixteen feet from the route he'd have taken!*"

NO one spoke. The wind rattled the window, and that was the only sound in a sudden, tense silence. Every man in the room turned to stare at the corner to which Jim was pointing. The crutch leaned there against the wall.

Then Matt Kirk laughed. "Hell," he said, "*I* put the crutch there. I picked it up after the old man fell."

Jim had expected that. His hands were white on his knees. "But as it happens, Kirk," he said grimly, "the crutch is broken, and MacAndrew couldn't have used it!"

But Kirk was not to be shaken so easily. "Sure it's broken," he admitted with a shrug. "It broke when MacAndrew fell on it."

"That's a lie! The crutch was broken when MacAndrew went to bed that night. He asked me to fix it. I was fixing it when I got the idea of going over to Molly Driscoll's. I put it there in the corner when I got out of my chair. MacAndrew never used his crutch to go to the door that night. He never left his bed. He was murdered *in* his bed, Kirk, and you know it!" Jim stood

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up, his heart pounding his ribs. "With all the blood there was on the body," he said, "there's bound to be some on the bed to prove I'm right!"

That was it. Everything else depended on that one point. Jim held his breath as Corporal Hendy whipped a gun from his holster and turned to cover Kirk.

"One of you men," the policeman snapped at Gendron and Travers, "take a look at that bed!"

And then Kirk moved. Up to now he had countered every thrust, but suddenly his nerve left him. His blindness was not too great a handicap. He was familiar with his surroundings and knew where the door was. Being blind, he didn't know, of course, that Corporal Hendy's gun was out. He lunged from his chair and threw himself at the opening.

Hendy could have shot him down, but hesitated. It was not necessary. Kirk hurled himself through the doorway and clawed his way down the steps. In a way, it was pitiful. He hadn't a chance. But his terror was greater than his common sense. He tangled in the sled harness and fell sprawling, and when Corporal Hendy brought him back, he was cursing Jim in a high, shrill voice that was out of control. Five minutes of cursing condemned him and cleared the last cloud of suspicion that hung over Jim Donley.

When the handcuffs had been removed from his wrists and placed where they belonged, Jim went silently past the others into old Sandy MacAndrew's bedroom. He was standing there, staring down at the bed, when Hendy stepped up beside him.

"There's no blood here, son," the policeman said quietly.

"No." Jim shook his head. "I . . . I didn't think there would be. Kirk used my gun, and it's pretty light; even at close range it wouldn't make much mess. But I didn't think he would know for sure, or have the courage to wait until you looked." He leaned against the wall and let his breath out slowly.

"It's a queer thing," he said thoughtfully. "I knew there ought to be a loophole in the case against me, but until Kirk himself pointed it out I couldn't see it. It was just a remark he made—a chance remark about old MacAndrew being on his last legs."

THE END.

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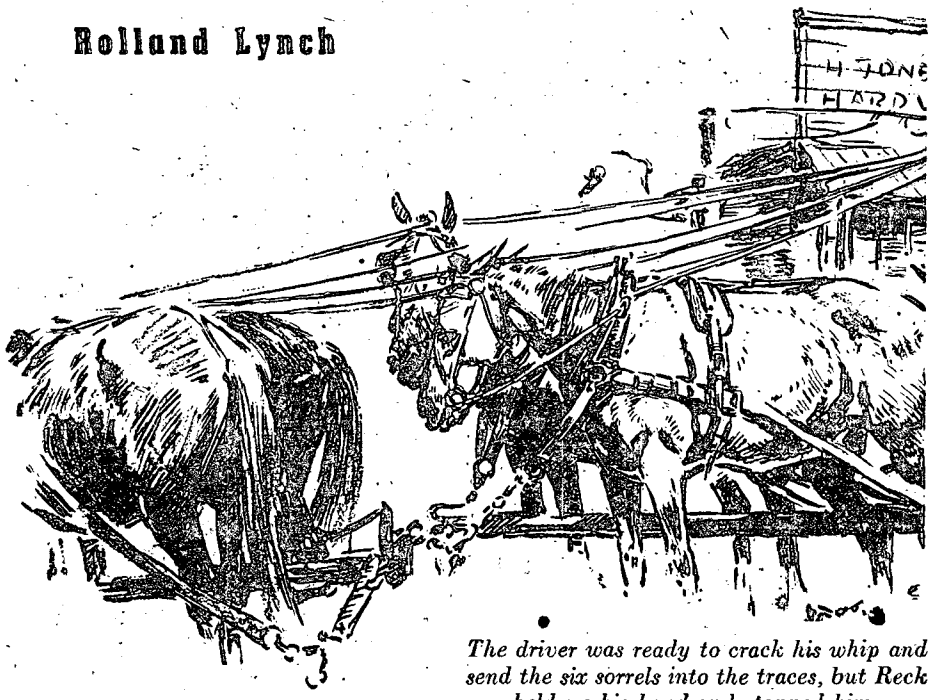
A KILLER COMES

by

Rolland Lynch



The driver was ready to crack his whip and send the six sorrels into the traces, but Reck held up his hand and stopped him.

CHAPTER I

GUN-SMOKE RENDEZVOUS

MORG CURRAN and Pi Dulac listened expectantly here in the cool living room of the Double Circle ranchhouse. They had heard it before and were waiting for it to come again. Morg's lean brown fingers drummed on the table top. The lids of his eyes were down, hiding his thoughts. Pi kept shifting his pale eyes from Morg to the walls of the room. His lips made a thin gash across his sharp, tense face.

They both jumped as it sounded again; the staccato smash of five shots leaving a short gun so close together you couldn't count them. In the second's pause, Pi's lips drew back over his teeth. The gun spoke again, the shots a bit closer together than the first.

Morg jerked his head toward the window. He and Dulac got up and went to the sill, peering out through the slits in the blind. They could see the gunman there by the clump of cottonwoods at the far end of the ranch yard.

"He's getting faster," muttered Pi.

Morg nodded. "Fast enough to take the trail."

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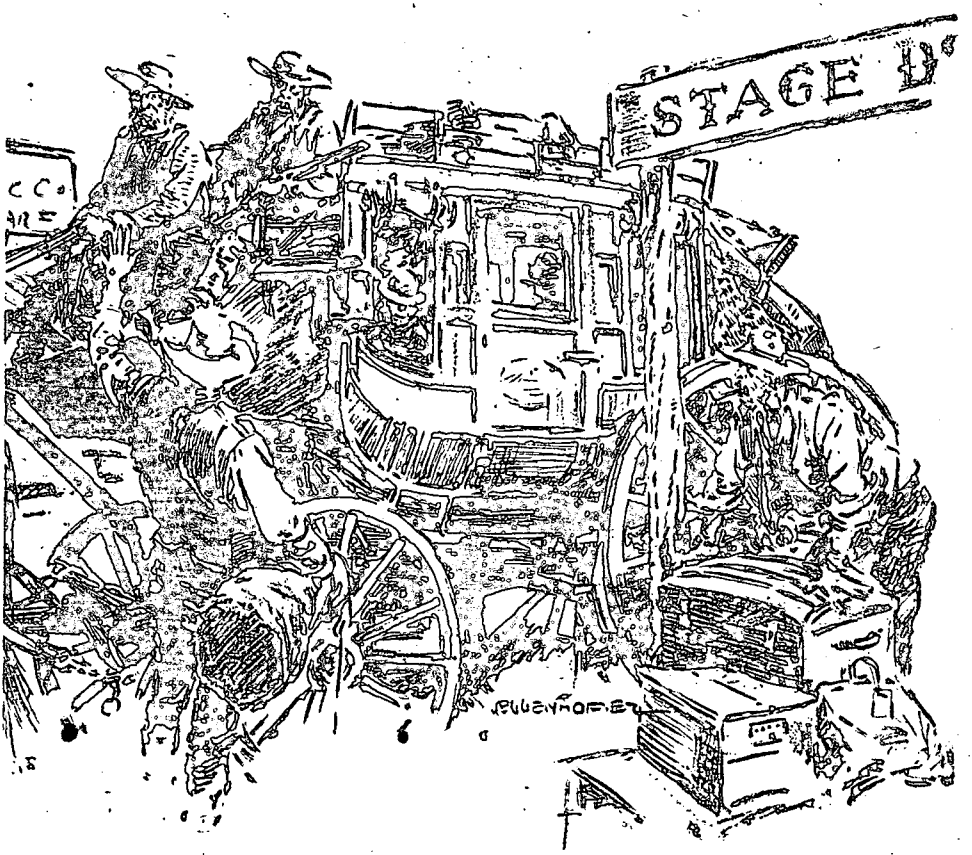
HOME TO ROOST



They fell silent, watching the young puncher out there.

Reck Rollins stood twenty paces from a sack of straw that swung pendulously from a tree branch in the dying afternoon breeze. Braced solidly on Levi-clad legs, he scooped, drew and let the hammer fall on the up go, then fanned it. Quicker than the eye could register, purple rockets gushed from the muzzle of the gun, dust puffed from the sack and little wisps of straw fluttered down. Bluish smoke spiraled up from the gun barrel and fanned out around the brim of Reck's sombrero.

Morg and Pi turned back from the window to the table as the puncher spun and headed for the bunkhouse.

Resuming his lazy sprawl in the chair, Morg said: "He's been a good pupil. There're only three men in New Mexico who can match that kind of shooting. With a shade of luck, Reck can top 'em. And he's ready. Been chafin' lately. I'm sending him out tonight."

Pi hitched his legs one across the other. "Which ain't too soon for me. Them hombres got our number. We can't make a move until—"

"Shut up," Morg said brusquely. "They'll never get out of Las Lunas

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alive. Once Reck sees these blackmail notes there'll be no stopping him. It's a cinch."

"I've seen cinches break," cautioned Pi. "Those Bravos are pretty smart. They've been layin' low for five years now, lettin' us alone, but—"

"You leave the thinking to me," Morg snapped. "They ain't been layin' low, they've gone respectable."

"How you got it figured?" asked Pi.

"I'm sending this phony package down there by you. You'll give it to the post office. That'll tip their hands to the kid. It'll happen so fast from there on out there won't be nothin' to it."

"Good," approved Pi, scrubbing his palms together.

They fell silent again. With his eyes half closed, Morg looked for holes in what seemed like an airtight scheme. Step by step, he went over the route. And with each sudden gun blast he visioned, he saw the shackles binding him drop away. The heavy hand the Bravos held over him would be smashed aside.

Morg grinned faintly at this thought. He was killing two birds with one stone. If any of the three downed young Reck, the ranch would become Morg's. If Reck got all three, he, Morg, would still win—for Reck Rollins would then be a wanted man.

SWAYED by the triumph that would be his, Morg cursed softly. His pig eyes flamed as he looked about the room. Pi Dulac watched him closely. There was no telling what Morg might do when he was this way.

But a slow grin parted Morg's lips. When Reck was gone, everything reminding Morg of Rance Rollins would be taken out of this house. Those things had to be kept now to humor Reck. The kid didn't know how much Morg had hated Rance; and still hated the thought of him. Rance, the hard worker, square-shooter, the law-abiding.

Blood ties had not bound Morg to Rance Rollins. But Rance had sought to help his weakling stepbrother. That only served to make Morg hate him more, for Morg interpreted that kindness as arrogance of the strong for the weak. Sharp words split them and hate deepened when Rance turned his stepbrother out for the renegade he was. Morg had vowed to get his share of the outfit—and was now well on the way to achievement. Young Reck had leaned heavily upon him since that day five years ago when Morg had ridden in to find the youngster of fifteen smoothing the last shovel of dirt on his father's grave.

Reck had been in Sabinal getting the mail when it happened. Morg had fathered the broken-hearted button, promising him he would give him the names of the three men who had done the job the day Reck became proficient with a gun.

He gave Reck lessons. And with the deadly ambition to face his father's killers roweling him, the boy developed speed and savagery that caused even Morg to look at him wonderingly.

As self-appointed guardian of the Double Circle until Reck became of age, Morg saw figures on the ranch books that made his brain whirl. He had never known that such profits could be made along with respectability. Morg's apparent fondness for Reck had made the people of Taos Valley and Sabinal look up to him. He liked his new-found affluence—and meant to enlarge it.

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Continued from page 78

It could be done. Every rancher in the valley was indebted to the solvent Double Circle spread. Those notes could be called once Reck was out of the way. Morg's cunning brain spun the plan. Carefully chosen words became dynamite to the spark Reck nursed. And now Morg would send the youngster after the scalps of the only men who knew Morg Curran's black soul. He had taught Reck well, and he had further proof here on the table to inflame the young rancher beyond sane reasoning.

Now, gathering up those papers, Morg motioned for the watchful Pi to follow. Together, they left the room and went down the porch steps into the ranch yard. The lean, wasp-waisted figure of Reck Rollins stood there by the grave of his father.

"Reck," Morg called. "Come here. I have something to show you."

Reck Rollins turned slowly and strode toward them. His was the rolling gait of the man born to the saddle. The hardness of his young face was startling. It could have been handsome, that countenance, but the bitterness and teachings of how to hate had put their deep marks on him. He hadn't smiled in five years, and showed it. Minute lines fanned from the corners of his tight-lipped mouth. His steel-blue eyes had a strange fixity that bored into everything he looked upon. His movements were measured, his smooth hands always close to his tied-down holsters. He came on like a person capable of striding through a brick wall. He stopped before them, his eyes sliding over Pi coolly, and Morg Curran's pigeon-chested partner shivered.

Morg forced a trace of fear into his voice. "I got to tell you, son, they're doin' it to me now; for the same thing your daddy and me did when we were kids. Pi just brought in the mail from Sabinal."

RECK seemed abstract when he took the letter and read, but inside him heat was beginning to mount. Slowly he scanned the page. Death to Morg Curran unless money was sent to the Bravos, general delivery, Las Lunas. Ten thousand dollars! Anger seething in him, Reck crumpled the paper in his brown fist.

Morg wrung his hands. "We ain't got that much right now, kid," he said. "I'm a goner, sure. I never should have stayed by you, guiding you like I have. The Bravos will hound me to the grave, just like they did your father."

"You'll never regret what you've done for me, Morg," Reck said bleakly. "Just give me the names of those men."

"I hate to start you out like this—" began Morg reluctantly.

"Who are they?" demanded the young man.

Morg spread his hands. "If you're bound to get 'em, I can't stop you. They're Chris Farrell, Cleve Manton and Todo Mendez. They're running businesses as a cover-up to their real work down in Las Lunas. The best I can do is flush 'em out for you, son. I'll send 'em a phony package of money. When they come to pick it up they're yours."

Reck nodded soberly. "I've waited a long time," he said. "They never gave dad a chance. I found him there"—he pointed to the steps—"without a gun. He had been called from the house by someone whose voice he knew so well that he came out without strapping on his gun belt. His rifle was still on the wall peg and his Colt still holstered where he had left it. They did that

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to him because you say he turned them over to the law as any citizen should do a criminal. To spite him they dug something out of his past and tried to blackmail him. When he wouldn't scare, they shot him down. I'll give them little more chance than they gave dad."

Pi Dulac's shoulders drew up as if he were suddenly cold.

"Look out for 'em, son," Morg warned. "They're a clever lot. Chris Farrell's tie-downs are a blind for a fast shoulder hide-out. Same as Todo Mendez, the Mex. His cutters are a come-on for a knife he carries around his neck. He reaches for his collar every time. Cleve Manton is the only straight-draw man among 'em, but he's slow."

Again Reck nodded and without another word turned to the bunkhouse. The two men stood silent until he came striding back, his war bag slung over his shoulder. His return laid a definite chill upon the men, so coldly deliberate was his every action. He was not the man he would have been had he chosen his own life. He was an automaton, geared and set on a course by grief and hate. He had only one motive —to kill the men who had shot down his father in cold blood.

"I've had this bag packed for months," he said briefly. "Be seeing you."

As rigidly as he had come to them, he turned away. There was confidence and a great deal of self-sufficiency in his stride. Pi drew a shaking hand across his chin as Reck mounted and rode into the deepening shadows of night.

"He gives me the creeps," muttered Dulac. "If I ever saw an hombre made of ice and steel it's him. If he ever finds out—"

"He won't," Morg cut in emphatically. "He's going in blind. None of those Bravos got the gun tricks I told him about. They're all straight-draw men, and fast. Before Reck learns anything they'll be patting shovels of dirt in his face or a posse will be baying at his heels, because the Bravos are considered right respectable down there. Now, Reck will take the stage to Las Lunas, so you burn leather down there and plant the phony money package. Stay there until you find out how he does. The minute I hear from you I'll open the ball here. Before you come back, scout up some gun slammers along the border. The next clean-up's Taos Valley." He turned into the house, a gleam of anticipation on his face.

As Pi Dulac moved toward his mount, he looked down the trail Reck had taken. "I'm movin' in plenty of fast gun slammers," he muttered, "at fightin' wages. Protection against the kid if he comes back. He's a bad penny—an' they got a habit of turning up again." As he swung into the saddle, he shivered again despite the balm of the evening.

CHAPTER II

KILLERS' KIN

IT was near midnight when Reck Rollins rode into Sabinal. He went directly to the corral and turned his mount over to the old hostler.

"Pete," he said tersely, "I'll be gone for quite a spell. Take care of my horse." The corral man, staring after him, muttered: "Which is as definite as a gunman can be." He wagged his head dolefully and led the horse into the barn.

The town sounds broke about Reck as he went up the boardwalk. A couple of punchers came out of the Big Dry Saloon and went up the walk arm in arm. Their hilarity

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tightened Reck a little and brought back his carefree days. He shrugged off the feeling. He had no time for such things now.

Reck turned into the Sorrel Saloon. Going directly to the bar, he ordered whiskey. Oblivious of his surroundings, he waited out the night. These five years of gun practice had taught him patience. Now that he was on his way, there was no use getting excited. He did not notice the men's eyes that brushed him or the wide berth even his friends gave him as they passed.

Moodily, Reck watched the dawn make the saloon lamp light recede. Outside the town was awakening. He sloshed the whiskey in his glass and stared into the amber fluid. It was eight o'clock when he finished off the drink and turned to the new bartender who had come on duty.

"How much?" he asked.

"Jim said you only got one glass off him—an' I ain't served you none." The bartender shook his head. "Drinkin' man, eh? That'll be two bits."

Reck spun out a coin and, picking up his war bag, left the saloon.

The barkeep muttered to an early patron: "That hombre's thinking too heavy to be thirsty."

RECK went down the street to the stage station. Old Jud, the driver, was there on the seat ready to crack his whip and send the six sorrels into the traces. Reck held up his hand and Jud invited him aboard with profane heartiness. Tossing his duffel to the shotgun guard, Reck climbed inside. Abstractly, he ran his somber eyes over the passengers as he took his seat.

A perspiring drummer was next to him. Across the coach, facing them, sat a girl. On either side of her were two youngsters, a little girl and a boy. The latter had the dark face of the Latin. The little girl was all legs and yellow curls. Reck let his eyes go to their companion.

He guessed she was about his age; too young to be the children's mother. She was prim in printed gingham that fit high about her neck, and her straw sailor hat was set at a pert angle on rolls of auburn hair. As she turned from the window and let her eyes fall on him for a moment, Reck saw the finely chiseled features of her oval face. She was lovely. Her lips were rich and delicately curved and her eyes were such a deep blue they gave the impression of being violet. The coach started with a jar and Reck gave himself over to watching the town slide past.

Open country rode by the window when the buildings were gone. Where the valley rushed up to the rugged Burro Range, canyons broke away to run like veins through the upheavel of earth. On the horizon, Mesa Rojo floated like a flat purple cloud. The odor of creosote and sage was pungent.

Suddenly Reck found himself living again, seeing nature for the first time in many moons. A straw target had blinded him to what lay behind it. And he kept seeing the face of the girl across the coach from him. Roughly, he tried to get that picture from before his eyes, but he could not. He cursed himself for a fool. He had no time for trifles. There was a man's work to do; something that would make any woman abhor the sight of him. Then he turned, startled, at a light touch on his knees.

The little girl stood before him, holding to his legs to help steady herself against the lurch of the coach.

"What's your name?" she asked in her light, childish voice.

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"Reck Rollins," he answered, his voice a little curt.

"Will you hold me while I nap, Mr. Rollins?" she asked drowsily. "Miss Nan has Tito." And without waiting for his answer, she climbed into his lap and snuggled down.

Reck remained rigid, looking helplessly at the girl across the coach. She was holding the little Mexican boy whose dark eyes were closed in sleep. The girl smiled and said: "Thank you so much, Mr. Rollins."

The sound of her soft, throaty voice sent a flush over Reck's features. To cover his self-consciousness, he looked down at the youngster in his lap.

Then he was letting go inside, folding his arms about the little girl, making her comfortable. She moved, moaning a soft protest at being disturbed, then nestled her head in the crook of his arm. She was warm against his chest and he marveled at how fast and shallow her breathing was compared to his. When he was comfortable, he looked up again at the girl across the way.

She smiled and nodded. "You'll make a good husband," she complimented.

Reck colored to the roots of his dark hair. Then bitterness gripped him.

How full life would be if he had a youngster like this one nestling in his arms to call his own. A little girl that breathed fast, with a little red mouth that was soft and sweet in repose.

Bitterly, Reck put aside the thought. His life held no place for such things as this. He had an ugly chore to do. He owed his father that much.

WITH this battle raging within him, Reck found the day slow in passing. Several times he stole a glance at the girl, barely escaping before her eyes turned to meet his. The drummer dozed in the corner of the seat. Once when his snore sputtered and threatened to choke him, the girl's low laugh sounded over the leather creakings of the stage. The sound was like the running of free water over pebbles. It became another thing Reck fought to keep from his mind; to keep from wishing she would laugh again.

Now Mesa Rojo took form, deepening in color as night began to shut down. With the cool of evening, the children stirred. The little girl yawned and stretched.

"Feel better?" Reck asked softly.

She nodded, worming her knuckles into her half-closed eyes. Reck smiled and worked the dull prickly feeling from his arm. The girl squirmed her way in between Reck and the drummer, holding tightly to Reck's hand. The little Mexican boy had awakened, too. Crawling off the girl's lap across the way, he lurched to Reck's side. He put a pudgy finger on the butt of Reck's low-tied gun.

"Looks like you're adopted," remarked the girl.

Reck nodded and lifted the boy into his lap. He took his left gun, jacked out the shells, and gave it to the youngster. With a squeal of delight, the boy began shooting imaginary Indians from the coach window.

Then the coach was picking up speed under Old Jud's profanity and the night stop rolled up. Reck spent a restless evening and sleep did not readily come to him. He was glad to get under way at dawn. But the thoughts deviling him were augmented throughout the day; for there was the girl, Nan, and Tito and little Rose. Late the next day Las Lunas came up out of the plain. The coach

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whirled down the dusty main street, stopping before the stage office.

The drummer quit the coach with a nod and headed for the nearest saloon. Reck ducked out, turned and lifted the children down, then offered his hand to the girl. She smiled as she alighted and her nearness set up a hammering within him.

"Thank you," she said huskily. "It was nice of you to take care of Rose and be so patient with Tito. If you'll be in town long and would care to see the children again, I'm Nan Farrell and the children are Tito Mendez and Rose Manton. They're always at my house. We get along quite famously together. I live at the end of the block and round the corner."

Reck wasn't listening to directions. Farrell, Mendez and Manton! Those names seared him like a branding iron. The children and daughter of the men he had come to kill—the renegades who had downed his father. He had held the child of one of them in his arms. Had let the other play with his gun. Had fought the image of this auburn-haired girl all the way.

Little Tito was clawing at Reck's Levis. "Come weeth us now, meester," he begged. "*Mi padre* weel feed you thee tacos."

Reck drew a hand across his eyes and got a grip on himself. "No, thanks," he said curtly, and started to turn away.

"Come, children," ordered Nan Farrell. "Mr. Rollins has more important business than accompanying us. Thank you again for your kindness." Then she was leading the youngsters away, each by the hand. They looked over their shoulders and waved.

Reck stood staring after them. If Nan Farrell only knew his important business here. To kill her father. For there couldn't be two sets of Farrells, Mendezes and Mantons in Las Lunas. He was shaken and almost sick. Their fathers! He couldn't—

With a growl, he shook himself. The three Bravos hadn't stopped to think whether Rance Rollins had children who might grieve and suffer from his death. They had ridden in and cut down on him mercilessly. That was what Reck intended doing to them. He turned his back on Nan Farrell's lovely figure and the waving children.

CHAPTER III

THE BRAVOS

RECK was aflame inside as he shouldered his war bag and went down the street to the International House. He kept seeing Nan Farrell's lovely face, hearing her throaty voice. And the warmth and softness of little Rose Manton, the enthusiasm of Tito as he shot at imaginary Indians. They were tangible things that kept riding over the grim barrier he tried to build against them.

Sharply, he demanded a room from the pale-faced clerk. Once inside it, he tossed his bag carelessly onto the bed and went to the window. The little frame building that housed the post office drew his eyes. The sight of it was like a dash of ice water in his face. All his thoughts were driven from him. For into that office one of his father's killers would come for the bogus package of blackmail money Morg Curran was sending to the Bravos.

Reck would give that man a chance—which was more than the killers had given Rance Rollins. That was the way it must be. He had learned to hate, but not enough to shoot a man in cold blood.

He kept to his room throughout

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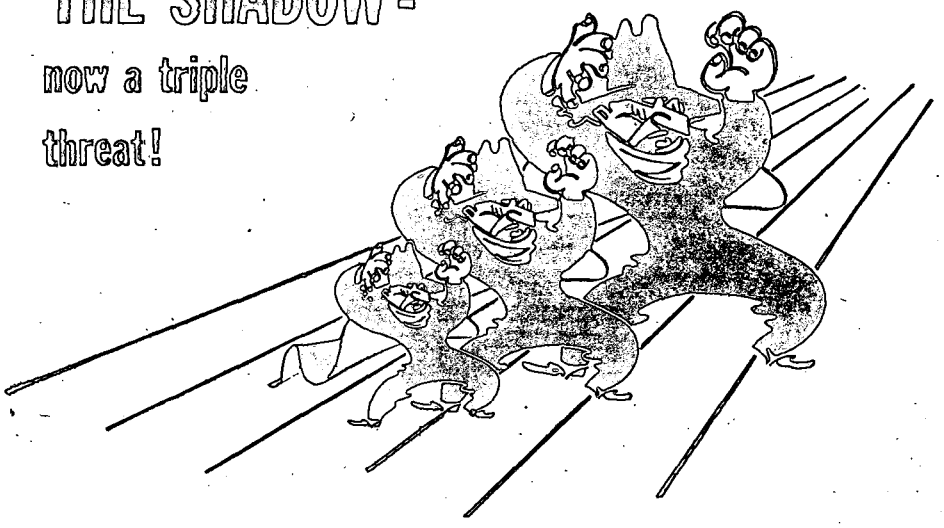

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the long night, but found little rest. The excitement of the coming encounter was a riot in his veins. His five-year-long wait was at last at an end. Gun practice had made him perfect, and he wanted to test his perfection against these admittedly fast-triggered tough hands.

With dawn but a faint promise in the east, Reck left the hotel and walked out into the desert. A safe distance from town, he drew and fired at the ear of a spiny cactus. Satisfied at what he saw happen through the smoke spiraling up, he jacked out the empties and put in fresh cartridges. Then, tugging his hat brim firmly onto his knitted brow, he returned to town. After breakfast he took up a stance just inside the door of the post office.

Town sounds broke around him. Wagons jounced along the street and horses came and went with their quick clopping of hoofs. Now and then a man called to another and somewhere a woman's shrill voice kept lifting against the unruliness of a child.

Reck heard all this absently. His eyes were fastened on every man entering the office and his ears were sharp to catch each name as the postal clerk doled out the mail.

A stocky Mexican crossed the threshold and went to the window and Reck stiffened as the man asked in a hushed voice: "You got sometheeng for the Bravos, Ed, no?"

"Yeah," answered the oldster behind the cage. "Thought you fellas had dropped that name long ago." He shoved out a package.

The Mexican looked at it as if puzzled and turned. Reck had to smother his urge to draw and shoot without warning. He stepped into the doorway, blocking it. He felt the presence of people behind him, but paid them no heed. They would scatter quickly enough when the play broke.

"Mendez," he said softly, "I'm Reck Rollins."

Todo Mendez looked up into the young man's face. Surprise crossed his brown features. Then his thick lips were creasing into thin lines and the pupils of his eyes were narrowing to pin points of black. For there was no mistaking Reck's intentions. Mendez's hand started toward his collar.

Reck watched that gesture like a cat watches its prey. He stood lax, taunting Todo into making the first move. But he was unaware of the Mexican's left hand inching along his belt toward the gun holstered there.

In the sudden stillness of the post office, street sounds were loud and Reck heard someone pounding down the boardwalk at a furious clip. He found himself hoping it wasn't some citizen who would run between him and Mendez when the ball began to roll.

Then Reck was seeing Todo's off hand—too late. It was on the butt of his gun and lifting. Desperately, Reck tried to make it up.

He felt hot pain shoot through his head and the strength go out of his legs. But as he sagged to the floor, he was filled with wonderment. Todo's gun hadn't gone off. Someone had buffaloed Reck from behind!

WHEN Reck returned to the realm of reality, his neck ached painfully. His eyes fluttered, but he kept them closed as the sound of voices came through the roar in his ears. Someone was saying:

"So the minute she says his name, I figure the package at the post office

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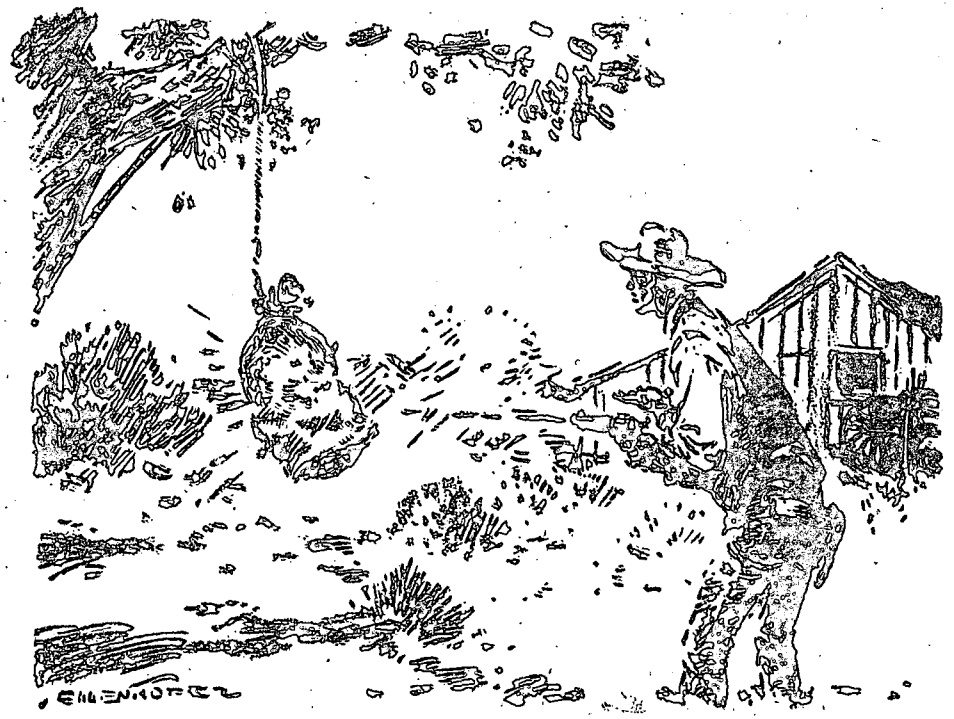

Quicker than the eye could register, purple rockets gushed from the muzzle of the gun, and dust puffed from the sack.

is a plant. Why, I still can't tell. But I got there just in time."

Slitting his lids, Reck could take in the room. Three men sat at the table. Chris Farrell was easy to identify. The contours of his face were the same as those of his daughter Nan. He was a grizzled veteran, rugged as the land. It was obvious that he was the Bravo leader, for he had that quality about him. Reck had already faced Todo Mendez, who sat next to Chris. That left Cleve Manton. He was short and stocky, with shoulders that looked as though they held a tremendous reserve of strength. There was a humorous crinkle at the corners of his faded eyes. If Reck hadn't known the black hearts of these three he would have sworn they were but kindly cowmen sunning out the remainder of their days in this town.

"You got there jost een time, Chrees," Todo Mendez said. "I would 'ave keeled heem."

Reck swung to a sitting position, fighting down the hot flashes stabbing at his eyes. "Better do it now," he said harshly. "Your luck might not hold."

The three men rose from their chairs and faced him, their hands near their guns. Reck's weapons lay on the table.

"We don't get this at all, son," Chris Farrell said bluntly.

Reck's lips twisted in a crooked smile. "You get it all right," he said. "So you better take it now. I'm unarmed, but you've never let that bother you in the past."

The Bravos glanced at one an-

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other. Mendez and Manton shrugged their shoulders in bewilderment.

Chris pawed at his chin reflectively. "I think I see it now," he said finally. "If you're looking for the men who killed your father, you've come to the wrong place, Rollins."

"A man with a clean conscience doesn't hear the Rollins name and then run half a mile to buffalo him from behind," countered Reck.

"But a man with a troubled conscience might have let Todo kill you," Chris pointed out.

That stopped Reck for a moment, then he flared: "You've just gone yellow. Better get it over with or I'll get you the first chance."

Cleve Manton stepped forward and put his gun down on the table top. "You're spoiling for a fight," he said quietly, "and you need some taken out of you before you'll listen." His balled fists came up.

Reck's shoulders hunched and he weaved unsteadily to his feet. Then he was stopping, standing his ground as Nan Farrell came into the room. Manton shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the table.

The girl seemed to feel the tension and her mouth tightened a little. Her eyes turned from Reck to her father. She went to Chris' side and said: "Don't be too harsh, dad. You must remember he's sick in mind and heart."

That fanned Reck's anger and he retorted: "Not nearly as sick as these men must be. I haven't the killing bothering me that devils them."

"You see?" Nan went on speaking to her father. "Underneath all that, he's human. I saw that in the coach when he held Rose. You've got to help him."

"He could clear up a lot of things by handing me my guns," Reck said bleakly.

Nan whirled on him. "Oh, you fool! Someone's poisoned your mind until it's like an iron safe with the combination gone. Nobody can get into it. Give dad a chance to explain."

"I haven't time to listen to lies," said Reck coolly. "Men like the Bravos are all cut from the same pattern. They crawl when faced with the facts. If they're fools enough to let me go, it's their funeral."

WITH a tight, exasperated "Oh!" Nan turned from the room. For long moments silence held the group. Reck watched them closely. He didn't have a chance. They were too vigilant. Finally Reck broke the silence.

"Well, when do we start?" he asked.

Chris Farrell scrubbed the palm of his hand across his mouth thoughtfully. "Tell me one thing, son," he asked, "who set you on this trail? Sounds like someone we used to know."

"What difference does it make?" Reck answered bitterly. "I got the deadwood on you three. You blackmailed dad because you had something on him, and then killed him for turning you over to the law. One of you showed up to collect on my stepuncle—"

"Morg Curran!" cut in Chris. "I knew it. Blackmail!" He turned to his companions. "Now you'll believe me when I said I saw—"

"I see heem myself," Todo interrupted. "By the bank—"

"Then he's down here spottin'," said Manton. "He brought the package."

"Exactly," said Chris. Then thoughtfully: "Cleve, see that he

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gets word that the kid is dead. I've got a hunch he'll fog it out of here right quick. If he does, that means Morg has plans up north. We'll show the button here—"

"Don't strain yourselves," injected Reck.

"Kid, we'll show you something that'll open your eyes," Chris promised. "For the time being, you'll stay right here."

"I'm warning all of you," said Reck. "First chance I get I'll plant you."

Cleve Manton grinned and nodded. "First chance you get."

"If things work out like I think they will," said Chris flatly, "I'll personally hand you your guns, butts foremost." He turned to Cleve and Todo. "You see that Morg Curran gets word about the kid. Cleve, you hit leather and wire me when the storm breaks."

The two nodded and left the room.

CHAPTER IV

KILLER PROOF

RECK shrugged callously as Chris turned to face him. "I don't care when things happen," he said. "Just so they do."

For long moments Farrell stood looking at Reck, his eyes narrowed appraisingly. Then he shook his head.

"I know how you feel, son," he said quietly. "You won't rest until you cut notches on your guns for your father. If I were in your shoes, I'd feel the same way. I've ridden many a back trail in my day and I want to tell you it wasn't fun. Small fires that give off little heat; cold meals taken on the fly; week-long hours in the saddle with rurales on your heels. Towns were places we had to sneak into, and were afraid we'd be spotted while there. But we were young then and thought it was smart. Then came jail—like when your father tipped our hideout. That was the last lesson. But that's for you to learn; for that's where this killer trail is leading you."

"You seem to be doing all right now," said Reck pointedly.

"Because none of the Bravos ever killed," went on Chris heavily. "Hopping wet stock across the border was done in the old days, but now laws and people have become more exacting. In the days of the Territories it was every man for himself. But even then you couldn't shoot down a man who was respected in his community. Those days are gone. We saw that and returned to our homes where we belonged. We married, had children."

"You didn't stop to think Rance Rollins might have had a son," said Reck.

Chris spread his hands deprecatingly. "You don't understand. We couldn't have left the trails we traveled if we had killed him. New Mexico wouldn't have been safe for us. We would have had to take up across the border. We—"

"I understand this," interrupted Reck flatly. "There's no reason for my stepuncle to lie to me. I read the blackmail note you sent him. I saw one of you go into the post office to claim the money mailed to you here. That's enough."

"You haven't stopped to consider that we were surprised to hear that something had been left under that name."

"The only surprise I've had," retorted Reck, "is that a man like you could have been blessed with such a lovely daughter."

Chris swore with exasperation. Then he turned impulsively and picked up Reck's guns. Holding them by the barrels, he turned back.

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At that moment Nan stepped into the room and her hands went to her throat.

"Dad!" she cried.

Chris extended the weapons to Reck. "Take them," he said wearily. "Jerking the fangs of a rattler doesn't do any good; they just grow more. If you're too warped to listen to reason, you'll cut me down some day, anyhow. So you might as well get it over with."

Eagerly Reck snatched the guns. Hate-trained thumbs eared the hammers. One of the men who had downed his father was at his mercy. But, somehow, the anticipation of squaring accounts didn't hold the satisfaction it had promised. Slowly, without really understanding why he was doing it, Reck let the hammers down and pouched his pistols.

"Not now," he said hollowly. "For the sake of your daughter I'll have to let you play your little game out. When you've hung yourself solidly, then—"

A slow smile brought the color back to Chris' leathery face. "I thought so," he said cryptically. "I thought so."

Relief made Nan's voice weak. "Come eat," she said. "Both of you."

Obediently they turned and followed her into the dining room. Reck took his place at the table, bending his head as Chris uttered the meal's benediction. Then he was falling to with relish, wondering how the keen edge of hunger had escaped him so long.

As he ate, Reck studied the two at the table. Apprehension and fear were still evident in Nan's blue eyes. She kept stealing glances at him. Chris seemed unconcerned. This was ironical—sitting at a table, breaking bread with a man he had come to kill.

The meal was finished in silence. The evening wore through the same way. Reck became faintly amused at all this. Chris Farrell was using his daughter to avoid the inevitable. The older man kept his eyes from clashing with Reck's. Only Nan looked at him now and then, a glance filled with fear and hurt. Reck met her eyes impassively.

IT was nearly ten o'clock when Todo Mendez returned. He burst excitedly into the room, stopping short at the sight of the guns on Reck's thighs. He licked his lips and sent a glance at Chris.

Farrell rose and spread his hands. "What could I do?" he said heavily. "Keeping his guns would only make his mind dwell on 'em. Now that he's got 'em on his legs he's open to reason."

Mendez looked as though he didn't quite believe that. Reck put him at ease.

"Go ahead," he said flatly. "Play your little game. I'll play mine when you're done."

Without taking his eyes from the young man, Mendez said: "I found him at a bar and let him hear me say the kid was keeled. He fogged it out of there and left town."

"Who you talking about?" demanded Reck.

"Pi Dulac."

Reck's eyes narrowed.

"Just like I said," Chris mused thoughtfully. "We'll hear from Cleve up in Sabinal, pronto. He'll have a few yarns to spin about Morg Curran."

Reck came to his feet. "Don't outthink yourself, Farrell," he warned. "Your yellow tricks aren't going to poison my mind against my stepuncle. If you think I'm going to fall for returning to Sabinal so you can get a crack at him, too—"

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Mendez tensed. Chris Farrell stepped in front of Reck and brought the palm of his hand smartly across the young man's cheek.

"Listen to me!" he thundered. "I've been trying to handle you with kid gloves because you're sick in the head. Now, by Satan, I'll beat you within an inch of your life if you don't calm down. All you can think of is killing. Poison your mind? The snakes have already beat me to it."

Nonplussed, Reck touched the red splotch on his cheek. Before he could regain his composure, Chris had contemptuously turned away and was saying to Mendez: "Get into your trail gear and meet me at the sheriff's office. Pronto!"

Mendez turned from the room, a smile on his lips.

"I'll be back in a minute," said Chris and went up the stairs.

Reck stood bewildered. In this moment he was stunned by the swiftness with which Chris Farrell had taken over. What could you do with a man who charged hell's fires with a thimbleful of water? Slowly admiration for the leader of the Bravos crept over Reck. Chris had done a dangerous thing and knew it. Unarmed, he had braced a man who wanted but slight provocation to kill —braced him with an open hand across the cheek. Many a man had died for less, armed or unarmed. Reck sank weakly back into his chair.

Nan came to his side. Tears were in her eyes, giving them a brilliant, starry look. "I'm glad," she murmured. "You took it like a man. Reck Rollins, there's plenty of savvy in you if you'll just let yourself go. If my father was as bad as you paint him, do you think you'd have a chance?"

Dazedly, Reck shook his head. "I don't understand—" he began.

"You will," she told him. "You've only had one thought in mind for many years. It takes time and proof to change it. Give my father a chance—for me."

Reck stared into space for long moments. Then he was looking at Nan, her nearness making his blood hammer. "For you," he muttered, "and little Rose and Tito. I'll give them every chance. But if they fail—"

Nan's lips parted for quick retort, but drew shut again. She nodded slowly. "I'll pray for you," she breathed and left the room.

Reck stared after her. Then he was burying his head in his hands.

CHRIS FARRELL'S low voice brought him upright. "Come on, kid. The show starts."

Reck followed Farrell from the house. They stopped at the livery and got horses. In the saddle, Chris led the way down the street to the sheriff's office. Todo Mendez was there, dressed for the trail. Two guns were low on his thighs and Reck could see the cord of a knife hide-out at the neck. The Mexican stood talking to the sheriff who lounged on the rain barrel. Chris and Reck swung from their saddles.

"Zack, give the button here a little information about Morg Curran," Chris said. "He's got a deal on with him and I think he needs to be set straight."

The sheriff brought up a knee and locked his fingers about it. "Nail your loose change down, younker, if you're having truck with Curran," he advised. "I've got complaints askin' his arrest for this and that, mostly blackmail jobs, but I can't pick him up. He never did leave much evidence. Seems he's a great

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one to get somethin' on somebody and demand money. Did that to you fellers once, eh Chris? Figgered with you havin' families and being the Bravos he could worm some cash out o' you because you wouldn't want the law to know. When he came in to collect he was sure sore to find out that everybody this side of hell's half acres knew you were hoppin' wet stock. I remember the beatin' you gave him, Chris. Remember him sayin' he'd get every last one of you. That was just talk, I reckon. Nobody's heard of him for four or five years down thisaway. Guess he got his belly full, eh Chris?"

"He might have," agreed Chris enigmatically and looked at Reck. The young man was staring into space.

"Thanks, sheriff," Chris said. "Come on, boys, let's ride."

Reck was silently thoughtful as he got into the saddle. This was hard to believe. Morg had seemed so conscientious. He had taken over for Reck and worked like a beaver to keep the ranch in shape. He had received blackmail notes—not sent them. Yet Reck knew one thing. Either Morg had lied about or was ignorant of Todo Mendez's gun magic. It was just the opposite from what Morg had said. Todo's knife was a blind for his straight draw.

Chris rode his mount close to Reck as they left town. "This is just the beginning," he said grimly. "Somewhere along the line we'll hear from Cleve Manton."

CHAPTER V

THE KILLER GOES HOME TO ROOST

IN the circuitous route taken by Chris Farrell, Reck Rollins was staggered by the mountain of evidence piling up against Morg Curran. Every law office had its complaints, but lacked evidence for conviction. In each territory in which the name of Morg Curran was known, citizens shook their heads and said he'd better not return.

Through all this, Reck kept his own counsel. He was reluctant to let Chris and Todo know his humiliation. The clincher came in Dos Pinos, on the Mexican side of the line, when Chris plied one of Todo's countrymen with liquor at the Grande Bar.

The drunken vaquero spread his hands and boasted grandiloquently: "*Si, señor,* I 'ave keeled many men. Pedro Vincente ees one fast hombre weeth the gons."

"What about that job with Morg Curran?" asked Chris narrowly. "We're not hiring without proof."

The vaquero took the bait. "To tell you the troot, señor," he said with drunken earnestness, "I do notheeng on that job. Señor Morg he come to me and say he got a job. I take heem on. We ride to thees Rancho Double Circle. Thees hombre he comes out when Señor Morg calls heem. He has no gon, so Señor Morg he decides to do thee job heemself. Poof! Jost like that he shoot heem een the brisket—just like that. I get paid for doing notheeng, señores. What ees thees job you would 'ave me do?"

"You've done it," said Chris and spun out a coin. Then he was turning to follow Reck from the saloon.

It was here that Chris got the terse wire from Cleve Manton that the ball was rolling in Sabinal. Reck made it hard for his companions to keep up with him after that. He hit leather and lined out for Sabinal. The hatred he carried inside him was doubled now. Doubled against a man whose hypocrisy had instilled in

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Reck false, insane hatred against innocent men to gain his own ends.

And as he rode the day through, Reck damned himself for the fool he was—and had been. He should have known that day at the end of the stage run that the Bravos weren't the men he wanted. Killers are not gifted with children like Rose and Tito and Nan. Environment would have made them bold and precocious instead of the polite youngsters they were.

Ashamed of his stupid actions before them, and filled with horror at the thought of how close he had been to killing Todo, Reck kept well ahead of the hard-riding pair. It was only when fatigue slowed his mount that he let down and allowed them to catch up.

"We'll wait out the night here," Chris told him.

As the two made camp, Reck went into the shadows and sat down. He was finding it hard to live with himself now. He had made a fool of himself before the Bravos—and Nan. He had been so smugly blinded by hatred that he had exercised little control, even in the presence of a lady. Bowed under self-recriminations, he stayed away from the warmth of the tiny fire. It was Chris who finally came to him.

"Don't take it so hard, kid," the older man said. "We all make mistakes. You were just a little more bull-headed than some others I've seen."

RECK shook his head. "I should have realized," he muttered hollowly, "that I was on the wrong trail the moment I met your daughter, and little Rose and Tito. I should have known when Todo was away ahead of me on the draw there in the post office. Morg lied to me on that score, too. But I was stupid enough to go blindly through without thinking about that."

"Five years is a long time to be harped at and not hold the teaching," said Chris. "The only thing bothering me was that you'd get out of hand before I could set you straight."

"You should have turned me over your knee instead of just slapping my face," said Reck humbly.

"I took a long chance," Chris spoke wryly, "when I did that. Bending a gun barrel over your head hadn't helped any. Now I want you to listen to our story—if you will."

"I'm ready to listen."

"The three of us were delivering some cattle across the line when we met up with Morg," Chris explained. "He was in some kind of jam and we helped him out, not knowing who he was at the time. This was the job your dad turned Morg in on and caught us, too. Maybe we were a little sore when we got out, but it had taught us a lesson. Morg offered then to cut us in on the Double Circle spoils. Don't get me wrong. At that time the Bravos weren't against taking quick money, but we were always against murder. When we found out Morg's plan we turned him down cold, so he hired that drunken Mexican to ride with him and Pi Dulac. Morg never was long on nerve, until he saw the other hombre didn't have a gun.

"When the job was done, the Mexican and us were the only ones who knew Morg had done murder. That was the only real evidence Morg had stacked against him. He didn't have to worry about the Mex. Bushwhacking was his business. But us—that was different. Morg had to get us out of the way if he was ever to be safe. He saw his chance. Use you. If any one of us downed you, he had little to

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worry about. Whoever won would have had to hit the owlhoot trail. So he just laid low and did a good job on you, judging from what I've seen."

Reck nodded. "He did a good job," he said bitterly. "He caught me on the bounce and told me he knew the names of the men who had shot dad. He taught me how to fog a gun. I kept seeing men in front of me as I practiced on the straw dummy. I vowed to get them; and slept with that promise. I guess it twisted my brain plenty. You see what a fool I've made of myself—"

Chris laid a paternal hand on the young man's arm. "Don't let it throw you, button. We've all been through the mill. Why do you think we've gone to all this trouble?"

Reck shook his head. "I don't know," he said honestly.

"Because Nan asked us to. She saw something in you—"

"Nan," echoed Reck. "Nan." Yes, she would have asked that. She was good and kind and gracious. He could see now what had been in her eyes when she had begged him to give her father a chance. He knew what she had been portraying without being conscious of it at the time.

Reck got to his feet. "If we go now," he said bleakly, "we can hit Sabinal late in the morning. I'm overdue."

Chris nodded. "Anything you say, son." His voice raised. "Todo, scuff the fire and get the leather on the ponies. There's notches to be cut."

In the saddle Reck took the lead, riding low over the withers of his mount. Excitement flushed his face now. After five long years he was on the trail. Funny, he had thought that before. But this time he was sure. Morg Curran's guilt had been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt.

THE sun was roof-top high when the false-fronted buildings of Sabinal rose from the valley floor. Reck slowed his pace until Chris ranged alongside.

"Will Cleve be here?" asked Reck.

"He'll be around."

In town Reck guided them to the corral. Old Pete, the hostler, came from the barn rubbing sleep from his eyes. He stiffened and gaped at the young man.

"Heard you were dead," he said excitedly. "Glad you ain't. Say, hell's sure been poppin' around here—"

Reck slid from the saddle. "Seen Morg?" he asked tersely.

Old Pete shook his head. "Too much of him. He's due in town soon to devil some of the boys out of their ranches."

Reck's lips tightened. "Let the horses cool before feeding," he said and went to the boardwalk, followed by Chris and Todo.

"Cleve weel be een some saloon," Todo said, grinning. "He always goes there when he ees away from hees wife."

Reck turned into the Sorrel's batwings. Cleve Manton stood at the far end of the mahogany, an empty bottle at his elbow. He waved as the three came up and said to Reck: "If your education isn't complete, I've got a little more—" He stopped as Chris shook his head warningly.

The bartender set out drinks. "Son, you're a sight for sore eyes," he told Reck.

Then Reck was spinning around as a cowman came in and called his name.

"Pete said you had come back," boomed Jim Carter of the Winged J. His harassed countenance broke into

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wrinkles of relief. "That uncle of yours has been raisin' the devil with me. Reck, your dad loaned me money in good faith on a no-time-limit basis, but Morg wants that money now. I'm supposed to pay this morning or get out. Kid, I can't do it. How about a little more time? Beef are just startin' to fatten up. I ain't never missed a interest payment yet; you know that."

"Take all the time you want," answered Reck flatly. "The—" Sounds of riders outside cut him off. Men were leaving their saddles out there and coming across the walk. Jim Carter turned to face the door.

Morg Curran came in, sided by Pi Dulac and the hard-case punchers they had hired.

"What about that money, Carter?" Morg demanded harshly. "You raised it yet?"

Reck stepped away from the bar. "I gave him more time, Morg," he said distinctly.

Curran batted the outside light from his eyes and looked past Carter. His face blanched. Pi Dulac cursed wildly. "He's come home to roost—" he began. Jim Carter lunged from the line of fire.

The two renegades stood close together. "The Bravos!" growled Morg. His punchers began fanning out.

Reck took two steps. All the pent-up hatred he had held for the killers of his father was surging through him now. All the perfection he had attained with guns was a part of his actions. The tick of the saloon clock was loud.

Morg started talking rapidly. "Kid, I thought—"

Reck grinned. Morg *would* try tricks even to the last—talking to get his victim's attention while Dulac drew.

Reck met the move easily. He had shot at too many straw targets and fancied them as men to be perturbed. Coldly and methodically, purple flames leaped from his gun muzzles. And through the spiraling smoke he saw Dulac sway like a gunny sack filled with wheat as dust puffed from his clothes. And Morg went smashing to the side, hit the floor, and lay still. Then all Reck's shells were gone, cracked so close together you couldn't count them.

The Double Circle gun slammers stood with mouths agape under the guns of the Bravos.

"You're all fired," said Reck flatly. "Ride out."

They lost no time obeying. Turning, they went out rapidly. The drumming of hoofs in flight echoed back.

Reck took out his Barlow knife and nicked the butt of each gun.

"These are the only marks they'll ever carry," he said, returning the weapons to their holsters.

The Bravos crowded around, with townspeople augmenting the group. Reck addressed the citizens: "Those who owe the Double Circle forget about those notes. My father's dealings still stand."

He watched relief flood puckered faces. Then turned to Todo Mendez. "Your boy invited me to your house for tacos," he said with a trace of embarrassment. "It's the only excuse I can think of for showing up in Las Lunas again."

"I know a better one," remarked Chris Farrell and winked broadly. "Let's ride."

Reck shook his head. "I'm going by stage," he explained. "I missed a lot on that last trip."

THE END.

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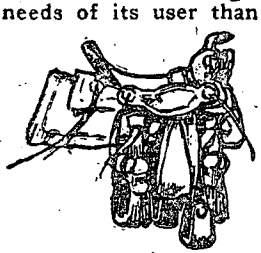
RANGE SAVVY

by Carl Raht

The cowboy's neckerchief that he knots around his neck is generally red, but not, as is generally believed, because of the cowhand's liking for bright colors. The style for red kerchiefs was set by the Negro mammy in the South, who unreservedly chose bright red for her headpiece. Therefore, manufacturers usually produced only the brightest kerchief for the market. And when the cowhand adopted mammy's kerchief for his neckpiece, she set the color scheme that decorated the cow nurse's neck.

The California saddle was a thing of artistic beauty; the Texas saddle a gear of utility. The Texas, or Western, saddle is more thoroughly adapted to the needs of its user than almost any other man-made device. The cowboy spends the greater part of his working hours between pommel and cantle, and not only must it give him some degree of comfort, but it also must stand the strain of his hazardous occupation.



The Texas cowboy was largely responsible for the range saddle's change in make-up from the ones used by the early California *dons*, who, mounted astride the ponderous, silver-laden affairs, with high, padded pommel and round-headed projecting "bucking rim" cantle, competed in feats of horsemanship. With other innovations, the Texan developed the double cinches. Being a tie-fast man in brushy country, he needed double assurance of his saddle staying on his pony.

In the early California days the richness of saddle ornamentation determined the social status of the *caballero*. Likewise the Texas cowboy prized his saddle above all his other possessions. He might part with boots, hats, spurs, or his bankroll, but no cowboy would part with his saddle. Asked who Benedict Arnold was, a Texas cowboy replied: "He was a man who sold his saddle."

The antelope, a deerlike animal once inhabiting the Great Plains, was considered the fleetest thing on legs by the frontiersman. Yet these swift creatures, once outnumbering the buffalo, had a weakness that led to their undoing — curiosity. Although no hunter's horse could stay in sight of a band of antelope in a chase, if the hunter hid and waved a red handkerchief, or did something else out of the ordinary, the animals' curiosity overcame their fear and caution, and the entire band would approach within easy rifle range of the hunter.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

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Our first letter in the Hollow Tree this week sounds a note that will probably be repeated many times over in the days to come. Alfred Milenski, from up in the Connecticut hills, finds that he has plenty of time now to spend close to home due to the existing war shortages, and he's getting an early start on collecting himself some letter friends to make his new leisure time more enjoyable. You can help out friend Al and yourselves, too, by answering his plea and the others appearing here this week, so hop to it, folks!

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please print this S O S in your Hollow Tree? I'm living in the country and must spend much time at home due to the war shortages, so have loads of time on my hands and would appreciate a few letter friends. Am thirty-four years old, six feet three, have brown hair and blue eyes. I promise long and interesting letters to all who write and everyone over twenty-one is invited.—Alfred Milenski, 38 Spring Street, South Norwalk, Connecticut

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Three mesquiteers from Texas—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are three young girls who would like to have Pen Pals from everywhere. Lena Mae is fifteen, a junior at Thomas Jefferson High School, has brown hair and eyes, and is five feet one inch tall. Emma is twenty, has dark-brown hair, big brown eyes, and is five feet tall. She works at one of the fields here as typist, but has plenty of time to answer all letters. Agnes is seventeen, has brown hair and eyes, and is five feet five inches tall. She is a senior at Thomas Jefferson High School. We all like to dance, play tennis, golf, baseball and go horseback riding and swimming. We like adventure and often go on long hikes. We will be glad to hear from everyone and will exchange photos. —Lena Mae Tallabas, 738 E. Locust Place, and Emma and Agnes Guardiola, 904 E. Euclid, San Antonio, Texas

Lucille conserves space—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is the second time I have tried to get my plea in the Hollow Tree. I am five feet five inches tall, and have brown hair and eyes. I am fifteen years old and like all sports. I will answer all letters.—Lucille Monaco, 233 Battery Avenue, Brooklyn, New York

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Here's a bargain for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of the Hollow Tree for many years and have carried on some interesting correspondence with many of the people whose letters you have published. Now I would like to try my luck and see if I can get my letter printed there. I am eighteen years old, six feet tall, and have blond hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting photos, postmarks, odd stamps and writing letters. I am a machinist and work here in Brainerd. I room with four other fellows and they say "Come on, girls and boys, and drop us a line and we will write as a company." I will answer all letters and those who send me photographs will be given preference. Don't let me or my roommates down.—Lester Anderson, Box 15, Brainerd, Minnesota

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Bonnie won't waste any time—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sixteen-year-old girl with light-brown hair and light-blue eyes and am almost five feet five inches tall. I am fond of cats, and my hobby is collecting stamps and snapshots. I promise to answer everyone who writes to me and will exchange snapshots. Write to a lonesome girl, please, and I'll answer right back. —Bonnie Dean Weir, Box 95, Sharon, Oklahoma

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Calling Pals over forty—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I hope you can make room in the Hollow Tree for this plea from a bachelor fifty-eight years old. I am a violinist and have traveled through eight States playing professionally. I would like to hear from everybody between forty and sixty-five years of age. Please fill my mailbox with cards and letters.—J. A. Musgrove, Rt. No. 2, Conroe, Texas

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Keith is looking for some old friends, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from girls, anywhere, any age up to twenty-two. I am twenty years old, six feet tall, and have brown hair and blue eyes. I would also like to hear from anyone who was a member of the CCCs in Company 2140 or 154. I have plenty of time and paper and promise to answer all letters. I have traveled a little and can tell you quite a lot about CCC camps. Come on, gang, throw a penful of ink at me and get it back by return mail. I hope this gets by the wastebasket.—Keith Blake, 95 Emery Street, Portland, Maine

From California comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here comes another lonesome Pen Pal from away out West where the beautiful pines grow tall and you can see snow on the mountains most of the year. I am thirty-nine years old and have dark-brown eyes and hair, and a medium-dark complexion. I have many hobbies, among them writing letters, doing fancywork and collecting pictures of people.—Irene Ryals, Box 1546, Westwood, California

Irene is on the lookout for true Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please publish my plea for Pen Pals? I am a nineteen-year-old brownette with snappy brown eyes and am looking for many true Pen Pals. My hobbies are collecting post cards, and I enjoy dancing and most sports. All letters will be welcome, and you can be sure of a prompt reply. I will exchange snapshots with all who wish.—Irene Sosnoski, 253 Garfield Avenue, S. W., Grand Rapids, Michigan

Want to hear a fish story?

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am sending you this note in the hope that you will be able to publish it fairly soon and help me get some letters. I came to the British Columbia coast twenty-five years ago, when I was quite young, and have worked in connection with the salmon-canning industry ever since. Have some very interesting snaps of this part of the world for anyone who cares to write.—George Wallson, Goose Bay, British Columbia, Canada

No more high flyin' for William—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a constant reader of your column in Western Story and should like very much to have my plea entered there. I am a young man of twenty-two, have eyes of blue, blond hair and am six feet one inch tall, and always have a smile on my face. Until recently I was a test pilot for a large airplane factory and have been very busy. But I've just found out that I have a weak heart and, consequently, no more flying for me. Now that I shall have a lot of leisure time I would enjoy making Pen Pals all over the world, so come on, friends, and send me a cheery note from your corner. Age or sex doesn't make any difference, so send your letters along.—William F. Kirwan, 224½ S. Brand Boulevard, Glendale, California

Five feet two, eyes of blue—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you enter my plea in the Hollow Tree? I am sixteen years old, have blue eyes and brown hair and am five feet two inches tall. I enjoy the movies, and my hobby is collecting snapshots and songs. I would like to hear from both boys and girls. Please don't disappoint me!—Florabelle Lint, R. D. No. 2, Box 6, Connellsville, Pennsylvania

Don't overlook this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here's hoping this letter will bring results. I am a very lonesome lady of middle age. I would like to hear from everyone who would like to make my life more pleasant, so please, won't someone write?—Mrs. Mary Thomas, 17 N. West Street, Raleigh, North Carolina

Marie will work overtime—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Last week I read my first copy of Western Story and I would like very much to join the Hollow Tree gang. I have bronze curls and brown eyes and am five feet five inches tall. I would like to hear from everyone between twenty and thirty years of age, especially those from out West. I will exchange photos and souvenirs with all who find my letter interesting enough to answer. Hope I am kept very busy.—Marie Drees, 1425 College Street, Columbus, Mississippi

Mary crashes through at last—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is the second time I have tried to pass through the gates to the Hollow Tree. I am not lonely, but am looking for Pen Pals. I hunt, ride horseback, play tennis and enjoy just about all other sports. I am thirteen years old, have dark-brown hair and blue-green eyes, and am five feet four inches tall. I'll answer all letters pronto.—Mary Wintersgill, 472 N. Holbrook, Plymouth, Michigan

High-school seniors take heed—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I enter the Hollow Tree? I am seventeen years old and I'd like to hear from seniors in high schools all over the world to exchange ideas on everything of importance. But I'll gladly answer all letters received, so scrape the rust from your pens and write now.—Ann Wilde, 335 Sawyer Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts

Fun-loving Joyce will be snowed under—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is my first attempt to break into the Hollow Tree, and I hope you will find room for my letter. I am a Montana girl of sixteen, five feet seven inches tall and weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds. My hair is auburn, and my eyes are hazel. I collect paper party napkins, match-book covers, letter headings, and souvenirs. I would like to hear from anyone from fourteen to twenty-four, so come on and write to a fun-loving girl who is Irish and French.—Joyce Goddard, General Delivery, Kila, Montana

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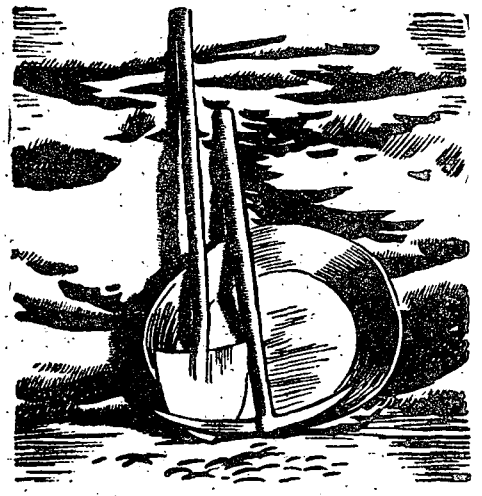

Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE placer prospector testing stream gravels with his gold pan should keep a sharp eye open for whatever heavy minerals the pan saves. Yellow gold is not the only valuable metal that may be disclosed by panning.

In Montana gem-quality sapphires have been caught in placer-mining operations. Diamonds ranging up to one and a half carats in size have been recovered from some of the gold-placer gravels in California. Such occurrences are rare. But they demonstrate the present point. Don't toss aside the residue in a gold pan simply because no gleaming gold is visible in the black-sand concentrates. First examine it carefully.

Even the black sands may contain values in platinum or other rare metals such as iridium and osmium that can be recovered at a profit if enough of the material is available to pay for its necessary later treatment.

"Is gold the only metal a prospector should look for in his gold pan?" R. M., of Indianapolis, Indiana, asked us this week. "If not, what other valuable minerals have been, or might be uncovered in this way?"

We have already mentioned some of the worth-while items that a gold pan can detect, R. M., and that is just the beginning. Cinnabar nuggets and particles may be found by panning, or in clean-ups of a placer miner's sluice box. This mineral, the important ore of quicksilver, is usually unmistakable because of its bright red color. Small grains of it are not apt to have commercial value in themselves. But they are a good sign for the wide-awake prospector that there may be a vein of the mercury ore in the vicinity, and it might pay him to hunt for it.

Tungsten ores, both wolframite and sheelite, are occasionally found in placer deposits by a prospector whose main search has been for gold. The sheelite pebbles will lag back in the gold pan, and tend to clog the riffles in a sluice box. At times these tungsten deposits are extensive enough and rich enough to be mined by placer methods for the tungsten in them alone, regardless of whether any gold is also present or not. In other cases, we know of one in particular in Alaska, where gold was the main value, but the tungsten concentrates were also saved, sacked and shipped outside to the States at the end of the season. The extra revenue thus brought in by saving the tungsten that others might have thrown aside meant a pleasant bonus for the prospectors on their season's "gold" mining.

Tin, prospecting for which is currently attracting wide attention among mining men in the West, is another metal that may be discovered in placers with a gold pan, and

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mined by placer mining methods. Cassiterite, the black oxide of tin, its principal ore, has already been noted in placers in the Western States, particularly in New Mexico and Nevada, though in the past these discoveries have not as yet proved to be of commercial importance. They are definite evidence, however, that tin does exist within the boundaries of continental United States.

In the gem-stone class, zircons may sometimes be encountered in a sluice-box clean-up or when checking gravel with a gold pan. They are said to be quite abundant in sections of Henderson County, North Carolina, where gold placers also exist. Zircons have lately been gaining favors as a semiprecious gem. Even cut stones, however, are in the relatively low-price class and fine-quality uncut gem zircons usually bring only a few dollars per carat in the open market.

Copper nuggets, some of considerable size have often been found in placer districts by placer-gold operators. They are primarily curiosities and seldom of actual mining importance. Sometimes coated stones of galena, the lead sulphide ore frequently associated with silver, are caught by the placer prospector. Here again, though tracing the float may possibly lead to the discovery of a lead-silver lode in the vicinity, the value of the individual specimens is negligible.

There is a lot of argument, sometimes heated, among mining men as to whether or not native quicksilver, drops of the heavy silver shining liquid metal, ever occurs in connection with gold placers. Such drops have been recovered, but because there is no little virgin ground left that is now being mined in the West the question naturally arises as to whether the liquid metal definitely occurred in that form originally or was merely quicksilver lost from earlier operations in the same district.

Native quicksilver has been found associated with quicksilver ores in lode deposits. Since cinnabar has certainly been found in placer deposits, it seems reasonable to suppose that metallic mercury of natural origin could likewise get into and be recovered from placer gravels, even granting that much of the quicksilver so recovered is undoubtedly secondhand stuff introduced through previous mining activities in the locality.

There is a report of one placer outfit in the Skull Valley district in Yavapai County, Arizona, recovering enough metallic mercury to increase its own stock of the metal and furnish sufficient "quick" for a number of small-scale, individual miners in the area. Inasmuch as cinnabar is also found in the local gravels in this district in fair abundance, this seems to be an actual instance of native mercury occurring in placer deposits.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

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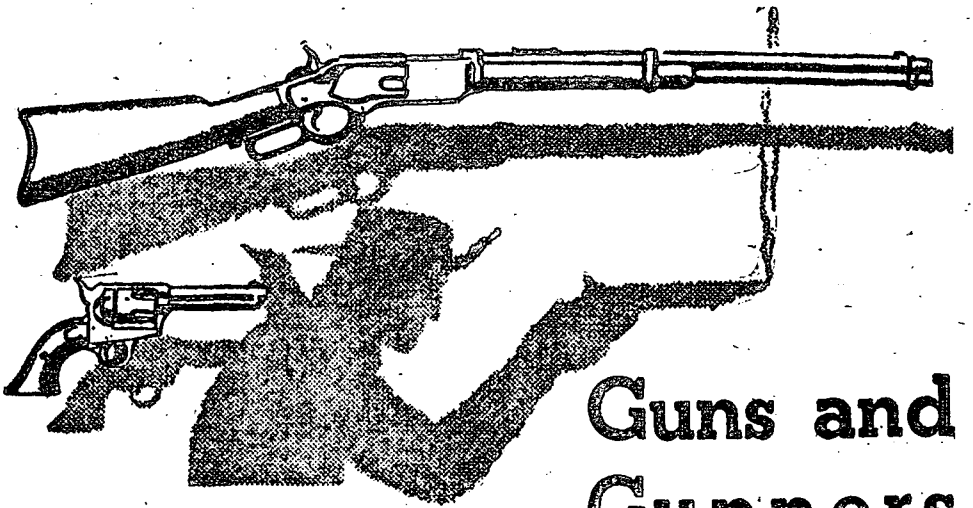

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

After the war—then what? Will sporting firearms be available? Will you be able to get parts for old guns? Will makers drop any of their guns?

These and dozens of similar questions are continually being asked. For a year, your firearms editor has anticipated a war shortage of sporting and target arms and suggested that you get your new guns while they were available. Of course new guns are no longer available, and used guns are at a premium.

We've suggested in the past how to pick a used gun, and we cautioned against the purchase of obsolete arms and guns which no longer have a parent firm in existence. So many of our friends ask the simple and direct question: "How can you tell if a gun is still made?"

First, will sporting firearms be available after the war? Definitely yes! The industry is far too big to fold up. As to demand—it is already greater than ever, and after the war it will be difficult to get new guns for some time due to the great accumulation of present orders. Demand? Many privately owned sporting arms are being sold by their owners for defense purposes, and after the war these people will want new equipment.

Will you be able to get parts for old guns?

The chances are favorable that you will be able to buy parts for *some* old guns. It depends on the gun and the maker. Most of our American arms makers have been supplying parts for all of their standard models, including those discontinued, as far back as the middle '90's. This does not mean that you can get a new barrel for a gun for which the ammunition has not been made for many years. It would be a waste of money on the buyer's part, and thus such a barrel would not be sold. In many cases a barrel for a different cartridge, still made, can be fitted to that old gun if the model is produced in other calibers.

How can you tell if a maker is still in existence if you plan to buy a used gun? Normally you might buy a few standard sporting magazines and study the advertisements

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to see if the firm is listed. Today, because of the war, few of these firms are advertising. Thus it *is* a problem for the uninitiated.

Among the American factories producing sporting and target rifles just prior to the war, and who may be expected to resume commercial production when hostilities cease, are the Winchester Repeating Arms Co. of New Haven, Conn.; the Remington Arms Co. of Ilion, N. Y.; the Marlin Firearms Co. of New Haven, O. F. Mossberg & Sons of New Haven; the Savage Arms Corp. of Utica, N. Y.; the J. Stevens Arms Co. of Chicopee Falls, Mass.; Iver-Johnson Arms & Cycle Works, Fitchburg, Mass.; and a few custom-built types by such firms as R. F. Sedgley, Inc., of Philadelphia, and Griffin & Howe of New York City.

Factories producing revolvers and automatic pistols are less numerous and include Colt Patent Firearms Manufacturing Co. of Hartford, Conn.; Smith & Wesson, Inc., of Springfield, Mass.; Harrington & Richardson Arms Co. of Worcester, Mass.; and the Hi-standard Manufacturing Co. of New Haven, Conn.

In the shotgun field we have Remington, Winchester, Marlin, Mossberg, Savage, Stevens, Iver-Johnson, Harrington & Richardson, at addresses previously given, plus the Western Arms Co., Lefever Arms Co. and Ithaca Gun Co., all of Ithaca, N. Y.; the Parker Gun Works of Ilion, N. Y.; the Hunter Arms Co. of Fulton, N. Y. (makers of the L. C. Smith, and the Hunter and Fulton shotguns); the Fox shotgun made by Savage; and the Browning Arms Co. of St. Louis, Mo.

In the ammunition field, there was Remington, Winchester, the Western Cartridge Co. of East Alton, Ill., and the Peters Cartridge Co. of Bridgeport, Conn.; and the Federal Cartridge Corp. of Minneapolis, Minn.

All of the above arms and ammunition makers will undoubtedly resume commercial work after the war. If you buy a gun bearing their brand name and address, you will be able to keep it in service.

Will makers listed as among the active firms of today drop any of their models produced just prior to the war?

This is difficult to answer. Naturally these firms are continually dropping obsolete models and bringing out new types. For example, Remington has been producing guns since 1816, Winchester since 1866, Colt since 1836, Smith & Wesson since 1856, Marlin since 1870, Ithaca since 1883, Stevens since 1864—and so on. Of course many of their products have become obsolete.

Many old guns by these makers can still be serviced after the war. But pick carefully.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. ***Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.***

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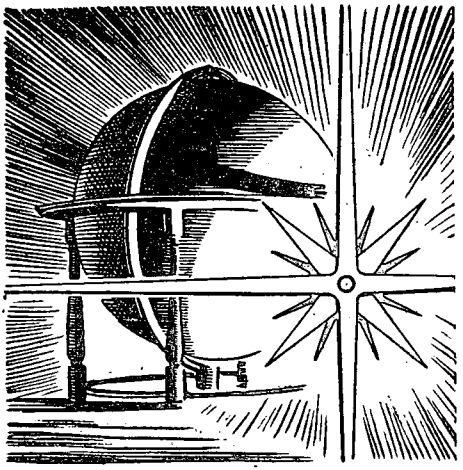

Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

THE outdoor enthusiast anxious for a try at real wilderness trapping can find good country nearer home than the Canadian Far North. Minnesota, for instance. The State affords a wide variety of fur bearers, and many of the wilderness sections in the northern part are completely removed from the haunts of civilization. In this region the lakes and rivers are often the only roads by which parts of the timbered wilderness can be penetrated.

Trappers in the Minnesota backwoods areas, men who know their stuff and are familiar with the country they work in, have reported taking as high as a hundred prime mink in a single season. This in addition to other fur bearers. Minnesota is the high-ranking trapping State D. R., of Fontanelle, Iowa, recently asked us about. His letter said in part: "I am looking for some information concerning wilderness trapping in Minnesota. Have had several successful years of farm-land trapping and am now planning ahead for the real thing, professional trapping in the deep woods. How long must one live in that State before a trapping license can be obtained? About when should a trapper start out into northern Minnesota to allow him time to prospect a trap line for the following winter season?"

Nonresident trapping licenses are not issued in Minnesota, D. R., and you would have to live at least a year in the State to qualify as a resident. Resident trapping licenses cost one dollar. If you plan to take beaver a special license ($2.50) is necessary, plus an additional one dollar for each beaver tag which must be attached to every beaver caught. The beaver and muskrat seasons are variable, fixed each year by the State conservation commission at St. Paul. Usually only spring trapping of these fur bearers is allowed, though the general trapping season customarily opens November 1st and closes March 1st.

The annual catch of fur bearers in Minnesota runs from roughly two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand pelts. A breakdown would show predominance of the different furs in the following order. Muskrat (in years in which there is an open season on them), skunk, mink (about thirty thousand mink taken a year), weasel, fox, raccoon, coyote, badger, bobcat, wolf and Canada lynx. That's quite a variety of furs.

A trapper planning to hit the northern Minnesota woods country ought to be out there by about the middle of July. This will give him the necessary time to get his base camp set up, his wood cut for the winter, his supplies all in and to

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prospect out his proposed trap line, choose likely spots for his sets and so forth. The careful and wisely carried out work done in those early months before the actual trapping season sets in has not only an important bearing on the trapper's chance of success but on his winter comfort as well.

Generally northern Minnesota winters are extremely cold, with the ground blanketed much of the time by deep snow. Usually from December until the thaws of April snowshoes are necessary in getting about outdoors and running your trap line. As in Alaska a toboggan is virtually an essential item in the backwoods trapper's outfit. So likewise is warm clothing and a cabin fitted with a good wood stove which will keep your tiny, wilderness home comfortably warm in below-zero temperatures.

Northern Minnesota trapping is he-man outdoor work. It is not a region to be tackled without previous trapping experience. Obviously it is no country for a man to winter in unless he is a first-rate woodsman, expert at taking care of himself under all sorts of conditions.

Much of the best trapping country is hard to reach. As in the lake and muskeg country of northern Canada summer travel is primarily along streams and across lakes, and usually via canoe. In fact, in many cases a trap line can be prospected out by canoe, skirting likely lake shores, or pushing up the smaller streams. Equipment, a little at a time, can frequently be brought into the base camp site from the nearest road by this method during the open summer months. But because of the early freeze up actual running of the trap lines by canoe or boat is seldom practical during the trapping season.

In some cases a team and wagon can be hired to get your equipment and winter grub supply into your base camp before the season starts.

A list of some of the leading counties for northern Minnesota wilderness trapping would include Lake and Cook along the eastern tip of the State, Beltrami, Koochiching, St. Louis, Lake of the Woods and Itasca.

Minnesota itself lies more or less in the geographical center of the North American continent, and includes the most northerly point in the United States. The west and southwestern part of the State are mainly level farm and wheat lands. The real wilderness lies in the northern section. Besides having more than ten thousand lakes and its innumerable streams, the State is the source of three great rivers each of which flows to the sea in a different compass direction.

The famous Mississippi originates in Itasca State Park and winds up in the Gulf of Mexico. The Red River flows almost due north to the chill waters of Hudson Bay. And the St. Louis dips into Lake Superior, its clear waters eventually finding their way to the Atlantic Ocean via the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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CONCLUSION

Winter Quarters

by Bennett Foster

The Story So Far:

Rebelling against the overly strict control of his cattleman father, Dan Mar, a top-hand cowboy and roper, accepts an offer to join Tom Ruffin's Wild West show. He and other members of the group ride into the nearby town of Brule where, as Dan is closing out his account at the bank, he and the bank employees are suddenly confronted by three masked bandits who lock them in the vault, then loot the bank.

Besides the small amount of money he has drawn from his savings account, Dan has only a hundred dollars paid him by Smokey Darnell, a roper with the show, in payment of a bet which Dan won. Since Smokey, a poor loser, insists that Dan did not win fairly, Dan decides to put the money in an envelope to be used later in another wager.

Dan becomes friendly with Nevada Warren, one of the star performers, and eventu-

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ally they team up in a roping act. Meanwhile the show works its way across the country, playing many towns and cities. In Des Moines and Davenport, holdups coincide with the appearance of the show, and in Clinton the express office at the railroad depot is looted and the collector murdered. No one suspects any connection between the show and the crimes, but Dan Mar notices that the masks used in one of the show spectacles are similar to those worn by the bandits who robbed the Brule Bank. He writes that fact to Sheriff Murrah of Brule, but his letter is stolen and destroyed.

Meanwhile, Emil Garza, a Pinkerton detective, is assigned to investigate the show and joins the crew as a roustabout. Gradually his suspicions begin to center on Dan Mar. A few days later Dan is attacked and nearly killed by two men who escape before he can identify them, but even this encounter fails to dissipate Garza's suspicion.

Ruffin's show plays in Willow Bluffs and once again a bank robbery is attempted by three masked bandits. This time the holdup is unsuccessful. Two of the bandits are shot down and identified as roustabouts with the show, but the third escapes. Garza, wounded by one of the bandits, stays in Willow Bluffs to recuperate and, when he is brought a watch charm belonging to Dan which had been picked up at the scene of the robbery, he is sure his case against Mar is cinched. Enlisting the assistance of Sheriff Murrah, Garza goes to Ruffin's ranch to arrest Dan for the Willow Bluffs robbery. Dan refuses to submit to arrest and flees, and Murrah fires after him.

CHAPTER XVII

FLIGHT

Buck Ruffin and the riders, alarmed by the shot, came running from the bunkhouse, shouting questions as they came. Murrah glared at Purrington and Tom Ruffin.

"Why didn't you stop him?" he demanded. "You could have done it!"

"I didn't—" Ruffin began.

Purrington, quiet and coldly scornful, interrupted. "The only way I could have stopped him was with a gun. I didn't want to kill him. You damned fools, why did you try to put cuffs on him? He'd have stood still and answered questions. Why didn't you tell Tom and me that you had a warrant instead of saying you wanted to question him?"

"Yo're his friends!" Murrah snapped. "If I'd told you I had a warrant you'd have let it slip."

Purrington laughed mirthlessly. "It seems to me *you* let things slip. Dan's gone. You said you wanted to question him about that robbery in Willow Bluffs. It'll be some time before you ask him any questions now!"

Buck and his cowhands had arrived and were babbling questions. Penny and Nevada had come out on the porch. Murrah glared about him.

"Get inside!" he ordered. "We've got things to do. Come on!"

In the living room Garza consulted with the sheriff. Purrington talked to Penny and Nevada, telling them what had happened, while Ruffin answered the questions that his son and the others poured out.

"It's a confession of guilt," Garza said again. "He admitted he was guilty when he ran."

"Of robbing the bank at Willow Bluffs?" Nevada's scornful voice broke through the babel of sound, and Garza turned to face her. Nevada looked contemptuously at the Pinkerton man.

"Dan Mar," she said, "pulled you out from under a bunch of mules at Willow Bluffs. That's the reason you're alive. I saw him do it. I was in the store next to the bank and I made Dan take me back to the lot."

"Mar pulled me out?" Garza stared at Nevada. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me," Nevada an-

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swered. "You came in and shooed Penny and me out of the room as though we were children!"

"It makes no difference what Mar did!" Murrah rasped. "He resisted arrest an' got away, an' I'm goin' to get him. Buck, you take a telegram down to Tejon, right now. We'll organize a posse an' go after him, an' I want my deputies to know what's happened. I want a net spread for Mar. Garza, you go down to the bunkhouse an' search Mar's grip an' trunk. I'm goin' to the MY. He might head for there. Now, let's get goin'."

Under the sheriff's orders, work began. Garza went to the bunkhouse, while Murrah wrote a telegram to his chief deputy in Brule. Buck, expostulating and reluctant, saddled a fresh horse to carry the message in to Tejon. Before he left, Garza came back from the bunkhouse.

"Not much," he answered when Murrah asked him what he had found. "There was an envelope with some money in it, an' another envelope with a ten-dollar bill."

"Let's see." Murrah held out his hand.

"That ten dollars is part of Dan's first salary after we began the act," Nevada drawled.

Murrah paid no attention. He was looking at five crisp new twenty-dollar bills spread before him on the table. Drawing a list from his pocket, he compared the serial numbers of the bills with those on the paper. When he looked up, his voice was triumphant.

"Maybe Mar didn't have a hand in the job at Willow Bluffs. I don't care if he did or not. He's wanted right here now, not back in Missouri."

"What do you mean?" asked Ruffin.

"I mean that these bills were in his grip an' that they came from the Stockman's robbery. That's what I mean. The numbers are on this list."

They clustered about the sheriff, Ruffin and Purrington peering over his shoulders, the others trying to see. Murrah's blunt forefinger followed a penciled line of figures and his voice rasped as he read aloud the numbers which checked with those of the bills. "There! Is that enough?" Still the harsh triumph rang in his voice. About him Nevada, Penny, Purrington and Ruffin and all the rest looked questioningly at one another.

"An' now"—the sheriff pushed himself up from the table—"let's get goin'. Here's the telegram, Buck. You take it to Tejon. An' the rest of you men come with me. Yo're my deputies. We'll go to the MY."

DAN MAR, when he threw Garza aside and struck Murrah, had acted instinctively. He was not afraid and he did not reason or think out his acts. He reacted to the touch of cold steel against his wrist as instinctively as a bronco that first feels a cold saddle on his back. Like the horse, Dan bucked and fought for freedom. That swift instinctive action gained it for him. He was away, across the porch and on his horse almost before the slower, methodical minds of the others could realize what had happened. He heard the roar of the shot that followed him, but the lead came nowhere near.

Darkness engulfed Dan and, his eyes still blinded by the lights in Ruffin's living room, he let the horse run. They went crashing away toward the east, dropped into the draw beyond the house and came scrambling up the other side. For

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a mile Dan's horse held the mad run and then, weary from a day's work, slowed. Dan spurred and again his mount responded, only to slow again.

Now reason began to return, and with it hot anger. Murrah had arrested him, for what reason Dan did not know. Garza had tried to handcuff him and had failed, just as Murrah's arrest had missed fire. He was a fugitive. Reining in his horse, Dan listened intently. He heard nothing, no sound of pursuit, nothing but the little noises in the quiet night. His horse pulled against the reins and took a few tentative steps back toward headquarters. Dan checked the movement. Where, he asked himself, should he go? Not back to Ruffin's, surely. Not back to those handcuffs and those strange staring eyes. To the MY? No, not there. He could not ride in and tell his father what had happened. The MY was not his home any more. Where then?

Deliberately Dan thought it over. His eyes were accustomed to the night now and in the starlight he could see the bulk of Turkey Mountain looming above the northern horizon. His question was answered. He turned his mount toward the north and, without hurrying, rode toward Turkey Mountain and the roughs of Vinegar Creek beyond. A modicum of safety waited him there. In that rough country he could hide, could dodge those that were sure to come after him. Time enough to decide what to do after he had reached the roughs. Time enough to sit down and think it out then. The horse stumbled and Dan pulled him up sharply. It was a long way to the rough country and he had a tired horse.

At midnight, or so the stars told him, Dan passed Turkey Mountain and went through the gate in Ruffin's north fence. There would be trackers among the men who followed him and, remembering that, Dan had chosen his path with care. He cut through the spot where, during the day he had worked cattle with Buck Ruffin, knowing that the horse tracks would be confusing and that his pursuers would have difficulty in singling out his line of flight. Beyond that spot he forced his weary horse to climb a long rocky ridge, cutting back on his trail a time or two as he would have done had he been handling cattle. Then, believing that the trail was confused enough, he struck out for the gate.

Beyond the gate Dan followed down a draw until, reaching the seeps that formed the head of Vinegar Creek, he stopped and let his tired horse water. That done, he went down the draw, keeping in the creek for almost half a mile. Satisfied that he had confused any pursuit, he pulled out of the water and continued on his way. The broken country welcomed him, and he entered it and stopped. Here where little draws choked with buck brush and squaw berry beset the country, he was safe for a while.

Making a stake rope of his whale line, Dan removed his bridle and, having loosened the cinch, picketed his horse. Then, while the breeze rustled the buck brush, he sought a little canyon. Sitting down, he stared gloomily at the stars. He was weary, with a bone-aching weariness. He was hungry and he was cold. The stars crawled by overhead, changing position minutely. The wind whimpered above the draw. The horse, in better case than its rider, tore coarse grass from the bunches between the brush, and munched it, and Dan Mar waited for the dawn.

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CHAPTER XVIII

FUTILE MAN HUNT

MURRAH came stamping into Ruffin's living room, slammed down his hat and scowled at Emil Garza. "He wasn't there," the sheriff rasped. "Hadn't been there. I'd just as soon run into a nest of rattlesnakes as Bruce Mar when he's on the prod!"

The sheriff seated himself ponderously in an easy-chair. On the porch, Tom Ruffin's voice sounded as he gave directions to Buck; and Purrington, coming in quietly, closed the door. It was midnight and Dan Mar had been gone for five hours.

"I take it," Garza said, "that Mr. Mar resented what you had to say about his son?"

"Resented it?" Murrah laughed harshly and without mirth. "He all but jumped down my throat. I left a man over there to watch for Dan, but I don't think he'll go to the MY."

"Why not?" Garza asked. Because of his weakness, the Pinkerton man had not ridden with the sheriff.

"Because," explained Purrington, "Dan and his father are at outs. Bruce didn't want Dan to go with Ruffin's show this year."

Tom Ruffin came in and dropped into a chair. "Now what?" he asked. "Have you any more fool ridin' to do or can we go to bed, Art?"

Murrah scowled at him. "Go to bed if you want to," he growled. "You'll ride plenty tomorrow."

"I'll ride nowhere tomorrow," snapped Ruffin. "You can get your own deputies to do your ridin'." He leaned back in the chair and relaxed, eying the sheriff.

Garza shifted in his chair and, producing the little gold saddle, examined it again. "My case against Mar isn't as good as it was a few hours back," he said ruefully.

"What do you mean?" Murrah glared at the Pinkerton man.

Garza shrugged and toyed with the saddle. "I told you how I got this. Miss Warren says that Mar pulled me out from beneath a bunch of mules. He might have dropped his watch charm then. I was basing my case on this charm and the masks."

"Maybe your case is no good," Murrah said flatly, "but mine is all right. That money in Dan's grip came from the Stockman's Bank. An' he as good as said he was guilty when he ran!"

Silence filled the room as the man sat, thinking moodily. A door creaked and every eye turned toward the sound. Penny and Nevada came into the living room.

"You didn't find Dan?" Nevada asked.

"No." Ruffin shook his head. "He hadn't gone to the MY."

"Where did you get that?" Penny's voice was strained as she advanced a step and pointed to the saddle Garza held. "That's Carl's."

"It was found and given to me." Garza looked up at the girl. "Why?"

"I gave it to Dan. Did he lose it?"

Garza nodded. "He lost it. Why did you give it to him, Miss Thwaite?"

"Because—" Penny said, and then with a rush: "Because I'd told him he was to blame for Carl's being killed. It wasn't so. I wanted to give Dan something of Carl's to show Dan I didn't mean what I'd said. He and Carl had quarreled and Dan rode away and . . . I gave him the saddle to show that

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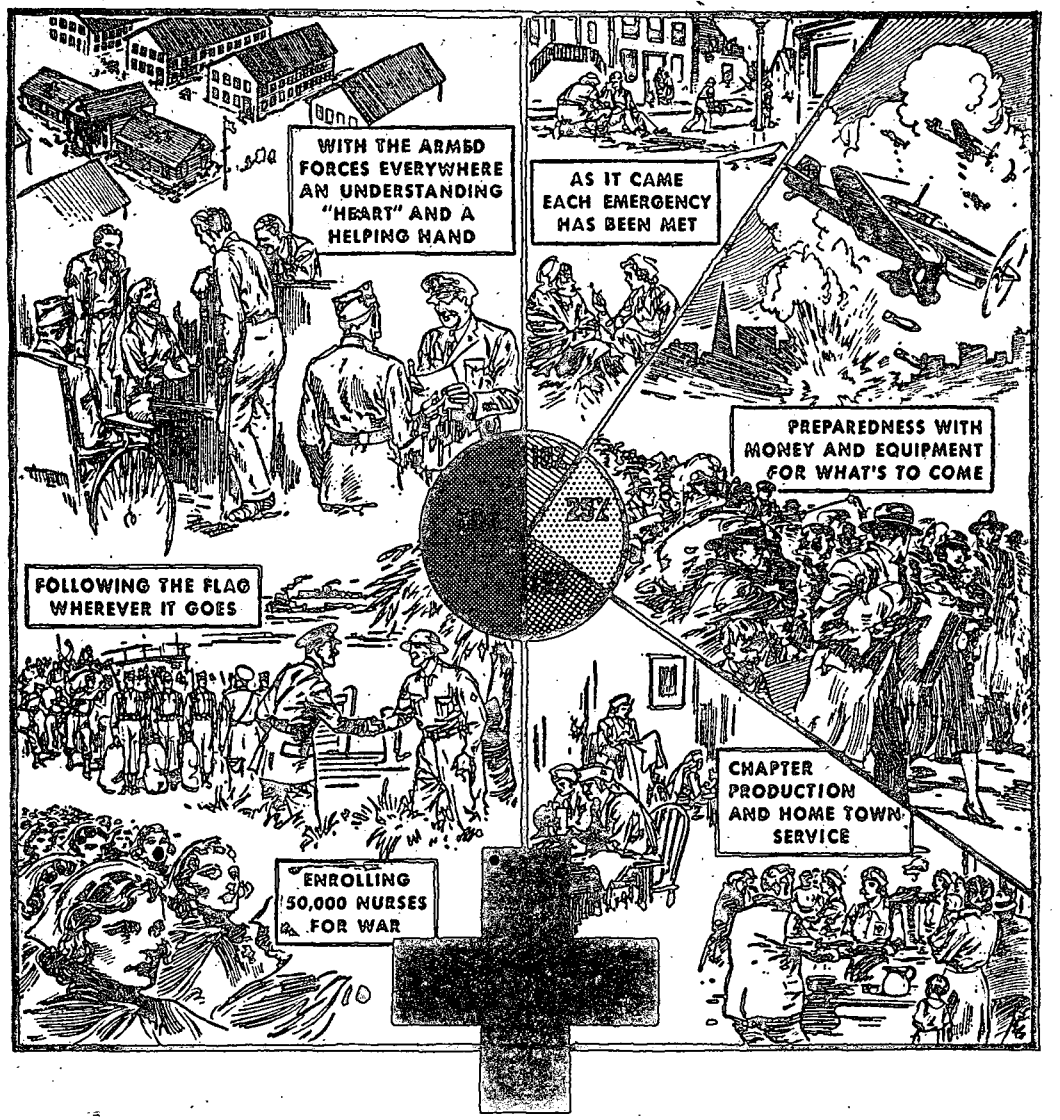

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there were no hard feelings, that everything was all right."

"Mar and your brother quarreled, you say?" Garza's voice was gentle. "About what, Miss Thwaite?"

"Because Carl wouldn't take him in our act. They almost fought and I stopped them. Dan rode off and he wouldn't come back when Carl called him. And then Carl was killed and— Give it to me, please. It belongs to me."

GARZA placed the saddle in Penny's outstretched hand and, clutching it, the girl turned blindly and went to the door. Nevada followed her, stopping at the door.

"I hope you're satisfied!" she said angrily. "You've made her cry!" The door banged shut behind Nevada's indignant back.

"It seems to me," Ruffin said heavily, "that there was no need of that, Garza. You just made the girl feel bad."

Garza stared moodily at the floor. "How was Thwaite killed?" he asked suddenly.

"Horse fell on him," Ruffin answered.

"Who found him?"

"Penny. Carl left her an' when he didn't come back she went to look for him. Why?"

"Just thinking," Garza drawled. "What was the coroner's verdict on Thwaite's death?"

"I told you!" Ruffin's voice was angry. "His horse fell an' killed him. He'd been dragged an' kicked. His head was all stove in.

"Was there an autopsy?"

Murrah answered that question. "No. Why do you ask that?"

"Because," Garza told him "this whole thing, this series of crimes, the robbery of the Brule bank, all of them tie up right here at Ruffin's winter quarters. Thwaite was a good rider, wasn't he? He wasn't a man to be thrown easily?"

"You don't have to be thrown when yore horse goes down!" Ruffin's voice was impatient. "You take out after somethin' an' yore horse falls an' good rider or not, yo're lucky if you ain't killed."

"Then Thwaite was chasin' something?"

Blank silence followed the question. Then Ruffin said slowly: "Why, no, he wasn't. Red an' Dan had got all the buffalo over west of Turkey Mountain."

"And Mar and Thwaite had quarreled," Garza reminded softly.

"Do you think Mar killed Carl?" demanded Murrah. "Is that what yo're drivin' at?"

Garza shook his head. "Thwaite's horse may have fallen, just as you say. I don't know. I do know that an autopsy should have been performed. There should always be an autopsy when a man is violently killed."

"If the undertaker had found anythin' wrong he'd have told me," Murrah said slowly. "I dunno— It's not too late yet—"

"I think you two are crazy!" Ruffin snapped. "I'm goin' to bed."

Purrington got up and stretched. "I'm inclined to agree with Tom," he drawled. "I think I'll go to bed, too."

"We'll start early!" warned Murrah.

"All right, we'll start early. I'll show you two where you can sleep." Ruffin advanced toward the hall door. "An' if you think yo're goin' to pull my men off their job in the mornin' an' send 'em all over the country lookin' for Dan, yo're mistaken." He paused beside the door. "We're gettin' ready to ship an' I need my crew."

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Murrah and Garza followed Ruffin. The sheriff had had enough of Ruffin's rasping. "If you think I ain't goin' to use 'em," he said levelly, "yo're a lot more mistaken than I am. An' if you think you ain't goin' to ride in the posse you'd better change yore mind. I've sworn you in as a deputy, Tom, an' you'll do what I say. Now where's the bed?"

Ruffin put Garza and the sheriff in the same room and, as they undressed, Murrah spoke. "Them two like Dan Mar. They don't think he's guilty, in spite of him runnin' away."

"They're good men," Garza answered, "and good friends. Mar did run away, but maybe—"

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe he isn't guilty of bank robbery."

Murrah ceased his preparations and stared at the Pinkerton man. "Are you crawfishin'?" he demanded. "You come out here an' get me to take out a warrant for Dan Mar an' tell me about the case you got an' all, an' then you say he ain't guilty?"

"I said," Garza spoke slowly, "that perhaps he wasn't guilty of bank robbery. I didn't say he wasn't guilty."

"Of what?"

"Dan Mar"—Garza slid into the bed and pulled up the covers—"is a mighty impulsive youngster. He does things quickly, on the spur of the moment, without thinking. He quarreled with Carl Thwaite. If I were you, Murrah, I'd order that autopsy."

Murrah paused, his hand behind the lamp chimney. The implications of what Garza had just said struck him and, for a moment, held him motionless. Then: "I'll do that in the mornin'," he answered quietly. "I'll wire the district attorney an' have him get a court order. Good night." With a puff he blew out the lamp.

DAN MAR was hunting rabbits. Equipped with a long, forked stick, he prowled the buck brush, up and down the little draws. When he found a cottontail he ran after it, blundering through the brush. Sometimes the rabbit took to a hole. Then Dan reached into the hole with his stick, down and down, and, perhaps, if he were lucky, prodded something soft. Twisting the stick, he caught it in the rabbit's fur and presently hauled out his wriggling, frightened prey. When this occurred, a blow with the back of his hand placed the touch of success upon his enterprise and he had rabbit to eat. In two days he had become woefully sick of cottontail as a steady diet.

Three times during the two days Dan had seen parties of horsemen riding the rough country along Vinegar Creek. Once he had hidden in a canyon, screened by high brush, and once he had mounted and slipped away, circling to come back behind the riders. The country was being systematically combed for him and, presently, he knew that he must leave it.

How he left was a matter of debate. Two days give plenty of time for thought and Dan well realized his predicament. By running away he had tacitly admitted guilt of whatever it was with which he was accused. He had been foolish to run away and now he regretted it. He would have done better to stay, face the music and find out why Murrah had taken out a warrant. He could, of course, go back and surrender himself and start over. But whenever he thought of giving himself up

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he could feel again the touch of cold metal on his wrist and see once more the staring, curious eyes of Ruffin, Purrington and the rest, eyes that surveyed him as though he were a stranger.

On the other hand, there was a lot of country beyond Vinegar Creek and the roughs. Nothing prevented his seeking that country. The parties that sought him could follow his tracks, but he would be at the far end of those tracks, making more. The prospect intrigued Dan except for certain things. If he left the country what would his mother think—and Penny? For that matter, what did they think now?

Brown fur blurred through the brush and Dan flung a stone and followed. The rabbit ducked into a hole and Dan prodded carefully. Rewarded for his efforts, he killed the rabbit and carried it up the draw. There, where a red sandstone bluff came down, was a small pocket in which Dan's saddled horse grazed. Under the bluff was a cave, a minor niche in the sandstone. Dan broke dry wood as he walked toward his home and, under the niche, carefully uncovered a coal of oak. Fire was a problem, for there had been but eight matches in his pocket and now there were only four. The little blaze, blown tenderly to life, crackled almost without smoke, and Dan, producing his knife, skinned and dressed the cottontail, eying it distastefully.

With the rabbit ready to be cooked, he was returning to the cave when he heard a horse coming gingerly over rock. Crouching in the brush, he worked cautiously toward his own mount. The horse was watching the ridge beside the bluff, ears cocked alertly. Following the direction of that look, Dan saw a single horseman coming down into the pocket. He waited, motionless, and then, straightening, strode forward. The rider was Penny Thwaite.

MAN and girl met below the bluff. Penny sat motionless as Dan came up, and neither spoke for a moment. Then Dan said: "How did you know I was here, Penny?"

"This is where we played," Penny answered simply. "Remember, Dan?"

He nodded, and, placing his hand on a rein, led horse and rider toward the cave. Penny swung down, lifting a sack from her saddle. Dan tied the horse and when he returned Penny had opened her sack, displaying food: bread, meat and a can of coffee.

"I couldn't get away until this morning," Penny explained. "They're looking for you, Dan. Murrah and all his deputies are staying at Ruffin's, but they didn't come back last night."

Dan squatted down beside the opened sack. He had not known how hungry he was, but now, restraining his appetite, he divided the bread and sliced the chunk of beef.

"Dan," Penny said.

He looked up.

"You've got to get away."

Dan waited.

"They think that you killed Carl," Penny said, almost choking over her brother's name. "Mr. Murrah got an order from the court. They . . . they found a bullet in Carl's head."

Dan did not move; he simply squatted there and stared unbelievingly at the girl.

"I came to tell you that you'll have to get away." Penny rushed the words. "Now! Right away!"

"They say I killed Carl?"

Penny nodded wordlessly.

"I didn't! You don't believe I did that, Penny?"

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"No. I don't believe it. I've told them I don't. And I'm not going back to Ruffin's. I'm going to the MY. Your father doesn't believe it either, and your mother asked me to come."

Dan got up. "Is that why Murrah tried to arrest me?"

Penny shook her head. "They thought that you'd been one of a gang that traveled with the show. They thought you were mixed up in a lot of robberies and a murder, but now they think that you killed Carl and that you robbed the Stockman's Bank."

"Me?"

Penny nodded.

"But I—" Dan began. Again there came the sound of a horse's cautious progress over rock. Penny's eyes were wide with fear and she took the step that separated her from Dan. Instinctively then Dan's arms went about her and for an instant they were together, each holding the other close. Then Penny shoved him away.

"Hide!" she whispered. "I'll tell them you're not here. I'll take them away."

Dan shook his head. "I'll not let you!" His answer was fierce. "No, Penny. I'll give up."

In the draw, Dan's horse nickered, and Penny's mount was staring toward the east. A horse came around the end of the sandstone and Nevada Warren said tonelessly: "I thought you'd be here." She swung down lithely and walked forward, leading her mount.

"How did you—" Penny began.

"I thought you'd know where Dan was hidin'," Nevada said casually. "I watched you and followed when you left. You two fool kids! Don't you know that this is dangerous? Why did you run away, Dan?" She seated herself on a boulder and stared at the two.

"I don't know," answered Dan.

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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"I lost my head, I guess. They tried to put handcuffs on me and when I felt them I just went haywire."

NEVADA continued to study Penny and Dan. "Well, you'd better come back and give yourself up," she stated finally. "You'll be caught if you don't. And if Smokey Darnell sees you first you'll be killed. It would be the chance he's waiting for."

"No!" Penny said violently. "Dan's going to get away."

"Smokey Darnell?" questioned Dan as if he had not heard Penny.

"He's back at Ruffin's," Nevada drawled, "and he's riding with the sheriff's posse. He'd like nothing better than a shot at you, Dan."

"Dan's going to get away," Penny repeated. "He can go to Canada. I won't let him come back."

"And have murder hanging over him the rest of his life?" Nevada shook her head. "It won't do."

"You want him caught!" accused Penny. "You want him put in jail."

"I want him to clear himself," Nevada corrected firmly. "You two kids haven't thought this thing out."

Penny stepped away from Dan, watching Nevada narrowly. Dan, too, stared at the woman. Nevada laughed mirthlessly.

"Do you know what you're up against?" she demanded. "Did Penny tell you what Murrah had found?"

Dan nodded.

Penny continued to stare at Nevada. "You hate us both!" she said accusingly. "That's why you followed me here. You hate me and you hate Dan. Why didn't you bring the sheriff with you? Why didn't you bring Smokey and let him kill Dan? You—" Penny's voice rose hysterically and Dan reached out and touched her. Instinctively the girl turned to him.

"I don't hate you," Nevada said wearily. "Neither of you. . . . It wouldn't have worked, Dan. I'm older than you are and we're a different kind of people. I've known that you were in love with Penny ever since the night of the blowdown. It's all right."

His arm about Penny's shoulders, Dan automatically comforted the girl as he continued to stare at Nevada.

Once again Nevada laughed her harsh, mirthless laugh. "You were high because we'd put on a good act and got a lot of applause," she said. "It had gone to your head. I knew that, Dan; I never took it seriously. I knew that you were in love with Penny and that she loved you." Nevada refused to meet Dan's steady eyes and turned her own away. "And you thought you'd committed yourself," she continued. "You thought you had to go through with it. I never was in love with you. You're just a kid."

"You mean you weren't in love with Dan at all?" Penny said. "You mean—"

"There are no strings on Dan," Nevada interrupted. "That's all I mean."

It seemed to Dan that Penny's arms tightened before she released him.

"And now that I've got that off my chest," Nevada said, "what about going back to Ruffin's? Your father's there, Dan, and he's fighting mad. He swears that Murrah will never catch you. But he says if you do get caught he'll get the best lawyer in the State and just turn things upside down."

"Dad?" Dan said, bewildered.

"Your father. That man is cer-

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tainly mad. He's jumped all over Murrah and Ruffin, and Garza, too. He's on the warpath."

Dan laughed. "If dad's on the prod, I wouldn't like to be Art Murrah," he said happily.

"Dan," Nevada said seriously, "how did that money come to be in your grip?"

"What money? The only money I had in my grip was ten dollars from my first salary from the act, and a hundred dollars that Smokey paid me on a bet."

"Can you prove that?" Nevada asked quickly.

"Of course I can. Red saw me put it in there. And you know about the salary money. Why, Nevada?"

"Because that money—that hundred dollars—was taken from the Stockman's Bank when it was robbed!"

It took an instant for Dan to assimilate the statement. He stared at Nevada. "Then Smokey—" he began.

"Red's not at the ranch," Nevada warned. "Smokey will say he didn't give it to you."

"Then I'll find Red an' prove he did."

"But," Penny interposed, "Mr. Murrah thinks that Dan killed Carl. Since they found that bullet he thinks—" Penny broke off.

Dan's eyes were narrow. "I can prove that I didn't kill Carl, too," he drawled. "I'll go in with you, Penny. Right away. I'll give myself up."

CHAPTER XIX

ROPE OF DEATH

GARZA was playing solitaire in the living room, the regular slap of the cards the only sound in all of Ruffin's big house. As he turned the cards, the detective heard a horse arrive. There was the creak of leather as a man dismounted, and then boot heels thumping on the porch. Putting the deck aside, Garza turned as the door opened, admitting Bruce Mar.

"Well," Bruce barked at the Pinkerton man, "has Murrah come in yet?"

Garza shook his head. "No. He didn't come back last night."

Bruce removed his coat and unwrapped his neckcloth. "An' if he don't come in till he finds Dan, he won't come at all," he stated with satisfaction. "Dan's too smart for him. Where's Penny?"

"She left this morning. She said that she was going to your place."

"To my place?" Bruce came over to stand beside Garza's table. "She didn't get there. Where's Nevada?"

Garza shrugged. "She started out after Penny. Didn't you see them?"

"No." Bruce sat down. "They weren't at the ranch; I just left there. Maybe they went to Tejon."

"Maybe." Garza picked up the card deck again. "But Penny said that she was going to visit Mrs. Mar."

Bruce was watching the game absently. "You can play that red seven," he remarked. "When did Murrah say he'd be back?"

"Sometime today." Garza played the red seven. "I think he's coming now." The regular sound of trotting horses filtered into the living room.

"That's him." Bruce went to the window. "An' he ain't got Dan."

Boots thumped on the porch and Murrah swung open the door. He nodded to Bruce, then scowled as he looked at Garza.

"Must be nice to sit an' play cards," he commented. "It beats ridin'."

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Garza folded the deck. He was a little tired of Murrah's impatience. "I'd ride if I could," he said briefly. "Did you find anything?"

"No." Murrah pulled off his coat and dropped it beside the table. "I didn't. I'm goin' to call it off. We won't find Dan. He's left the country."

Bruce Mar chuckled. "You wouldn't find him if he'd stayed," he declared. "I told you that."

Murrah's eyes were narrow as he turned to Bruce. "Maybe yo're hidin' him."

"Mebbe I am." Bruce's voice was bland.

Voices sounded from outside the house where the posse was breaking up and they heard Tom Ruffin say: "I don't know; I'm not the boss here any more. Ask Murrah!"

The sheriff scowled at the door as Ruffin came in, followed by his son and Purrington.

"Have you had enough?" Ruffin demanded, pausing just inside the room, "or are we goin' to keep up this foolishness?"

"I'm through lookin' here," Murrah answered, "but I won't quit huntin'. I won't need yore men any more."

"Well, *that's* good news," remarked Buck. "Maybe we can deliver cattle now."

"I don't care what you do now!" Murrah snapped. "I'm goin' in to Brule tomorrow, but don't think I'm goin' to drop this. I'll get Dan."

"Yeah," Bruce drawled, "just like you got him!"

"Damn you, Bruce!" Murrah wheeled on the older Mar. "If yo're hidin' Dan I'll have you arrested for murder, too. I think—"

"I think yo're crazy," Bruce interrupted bluntly. "Dan never killed Carl. An' if you think you can arrest me, try it! The only thing I'm sorry about is that Dan didn't knock yore fool head off when he got away. That's what he should've done!"

"Bruce!" Ruffin warned. "Stop it!"

"Well, damn it! He's got no business accusin' my boy of murder!"

Ruffin walked over to his neighbor. "You cool down," he ordered. "After all, Art's the sheriff an' he's got to do his duty."

BRUCE MAR subsided amid rumblings and Murrah looked at Garza. "Any telegrams come while we were gone?"

"No." Garza was placing cards again. "Nothing."

"An' they won't." The sheriff sat down beside the table. "I told you when we sent 'em we were wastin' money. Dan won't hit any towns."

Buck Ruffin, going to the window, peered out at the gray afternoon. "It looks like we'd quit just in time," he drawled. "It's goin' to snow. I wish we had our steers in the pens."

"We would have if we hadn't been foolin' around," Ruffin stated pointedly. "Where's Smokey? I thought he was comin' in."

"Belle called him. He went up to his house." Buck pushed the window curtains aside. "Here comes Nevada. Where has she been?"

"She and Penny went out this morning," Garza answered. "They said they were going to the MY, but Mar didn't see them."

"If Penny's lost that will be just fine!" Ruffin said wearily. "That's about all we need. Didn't she get to your place, Bruce?"

"No."

The men waited. They heard a horse stop, and steps mount the porch. Nevada entered the room and for a moment stood, surveying the group, then spoke. "Do you

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want Dan Mar, sheriff?"

"You know I do," Murrah said curtly. "Have you seen him? Where is he?"

"Nevada!" Bruce warned. "Don't you—"

"Dan's all right," Nevada interrupted. "I know where he is and he'll give himself up if you'll promise one thing."

"What's that?" demanded Murrah.

"You're not to put handcuffs on him."

"No!" Bruce said again. "I won't have it, Nevada."

The girl smiled wearily at the anxious man. "It's all right, Mr. Mar," she assured him. "Well, what about it, sheriff?"

Murrah stood undecided. "All right," he agreed. "I won't put the cuffs on him. Where is he?"

"I'll bring him in." Stepping out to the porch, Nevada lifted her hat and waved it back and forth. The men crowded out after her. From the draw beyond the house Dan Mar and Penny lifted themselves and rode slowly forward.

"Remember what you promised," Nevada warned.

Before the two riders reached the house, Bruce Mar ran down the steps. Murrah might have restrained him, but Bruce gave no warning of his intentions. Dan checked his horse and Bruce stared up at his son. For an instant neither spoke and then the older man said, "Dan!" There was appeal in his voice, apprehension and anxiety. In that instant Dan was given his chance to avenge all the slights and neglects that had sent him away from the MY, his opportunity to repay the cold, hard bitterness that his father had shown him. For a second Dan's eyes were hard, and Penny, reading them, caught her breath. Then Dan bent forward.

"Do you mean it, dad?" he demanded.

Bruce Mar could not meet his son's eyes. He turned his head away and his voice came chokingly. "I wouldn't blame you if you told me to go to hell, the way I've treated you. But yo're my kid, Dan. If you want me, I'm behind you."

IN Dan a sudden warmth broke and filled him. Now he had come home. Now, no matter what happened, he was back where he belonged. The hardness was gone from his eyes and relief sounded in his voice. "I'll need your backin', dad."

Bruce looked up again and the grim lines in his face softened. "You got it, boy!" he assured his son. "Tell 'em to go to the devil. Don't answer any questions. You ain't guilty. I'll get the best lawyer in the State an' we'll tear their case all to hell!"

Dan grinned frankly now. "We won't need a lawyer," he assured his father. "It's all right. Don't you worry." He started his horse again and, with Penny riding on one side, Bruce walking on the other, the three approached the porch.

At the hitch rail Dan dismounted and tied his horse. The trio mounted the steps, the girl and the man still flanking Dan on either side. On the top step Dan paused before Art Murrah.

"Penny," he said levelly, looking at the sheriff, "told me why you wanted me."

"So Penny told you, did she?" Murrah growled. "Did she say I wanted you for murder?"

"She told me that, too." Dan's voice was steady. "Let's get inside. It's cold out here." Moving through the group, he held the door

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open for Nevada and Penny. Murrah halted behind him.

"Go on in," the sheriff rasped. "You won't pull a fast one this time!"

Dan crossed the living room and took a chair. Bruce stood beside his son as though to protect him; and Murrah, legs widespread, towered over Dan and scowled down at him.

"So Penny told you I wanted you for murder," he grated, "an' still you had nerve enough to come in an' give yo'reself up?"

Penny made a small sound of distress and Dan reached out his hand to her. "I didn't kill Carl," he said steadily. "I came in as soon as I found out he'd been murdered."

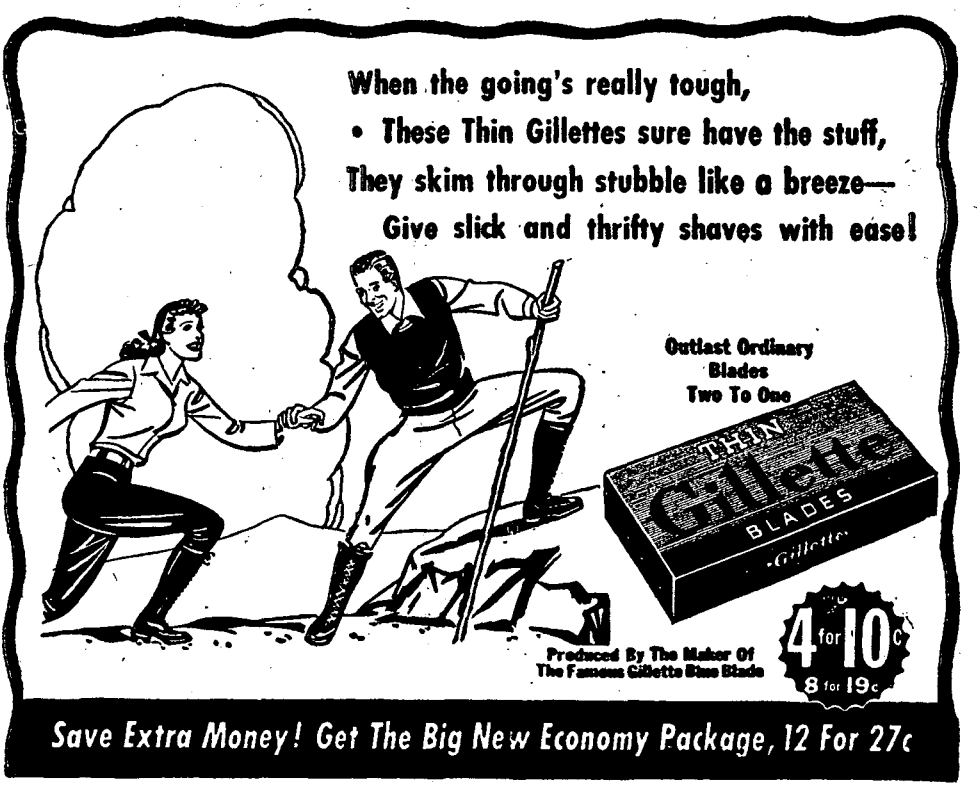
"You had a fight with Carl just before he was killed," Murrah blustered, "an' we've found money from the Stockman's robbery in yore grip. We've got proof yo're guilty, Mar."

"That money in my grip was paid me on a bet," Dan said steadily. "An' I didn't kill Carl. I didn't even have a gun that day. I'll answer questions, Murrah. Anything you want to ask me, but first I want Smokey Darnell in here."

As though in answer to the words, the door banged open and Darnell came in. He stood poised before the door an instant and then, striding over to Dan, snarled his triumph. "By Satan, I knew they'd get you, you murderer! I wish I'd been the one to catch you! You wouldn't be sittin' there!"

Murrah pushed Darnell back. "I'll do the talkin'," he said flatly. "Yo're willin' to make a confession, Mar?"

"I've got nothing to confess," an-



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swered Dan. "You've accused me of killin' Carl, an' of robbin' the Stockman's Bank."

"And of being one of a gang that traveled with the show, and taking part in half a dozen robberies and a murder," Garza added. "The mask you lost was found in the hand of a dead man."

Dan squeezed Penny's hand and released it. "An' I didn't do any of those things," he said. "Let me tell you. I found out that the masks used in Brule came from Ruffin's show. I wrote you that, Murrah."

"You wrote!" Murrah scoffed. "Where's the letter? I never got it!"

"Just the same I wrote you." Dan's voice was calm and his eyes coolly scanned the room, looking from one man to the next. Every man was watching him intently.

"An' if you ain't guilty, then why did you run when I arrested you?" demanded Murrah. "Maybe you can tell me that!"

"Does runnin' make a man guilty?" Dan drawled. "I lost my head, but I'm not runnin' now. I came in an' gave myself up after you couldn't catch me. Does that look like I'm guilty?"

Purrington nodded slowly, his gray eyes fixed on Dan's face. Dan flashed a glance at the captain and knew that Purrington was with him.

"You wanted to talk," Murrah said curtly. "You know what yo're accused of. Go ahead an' talk!"

"I will!" Dan straightened in the chair. "I told you after the Stockman's robbery that I'd seen a little gold saddle watch charm on one of the men. Remember? I told Carl Thwaite about that, too. Carl had one of those watch charms, an' he saw the masks that were used. He must have known they came from the show."

Dan paused.

"Well?" Murrah said, a little doubt in his voice.

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"Well," continued Dan, "maybe Carl got some ideas. Maybe Carl talked to somebody about it. Maybe that's why Carl was killed."

"Maybe!" Smokey Darnell snarled. "You killed Carl, you damned murderer! You know you did!"

"No." Dan shook his head as he stared straight at Darnell. "I said 'maybe,' but I didn't mean it. That's what actually happened. Carl had an idea of who had done the business an' he talked to this man. The man got scared and killed Carl. He had to because he knew that Carl would turn him in. He shot Carl an' then beat Carl's head with a rock to make it look as though Carl's horse had killed him. He stuck Carl's foot in a stirrup an' turned Carl's horse loose, but before that he did one other thing. He was so anxious to make it look right, that he went too far. He dragged a spur across the seat of Carl's saddle to leave a set of tracks. You remember that. All of you. You know there's a set of tracks across the saddle."

Heads were nodding in the room, Buck, Tom Ruffin, Purrington, all giving confirmation.

"Carl's saddle is out on my horse now," Dan drawled, still watching Smokey Darnell levelly. "The spur tracks are on it. They'll fit the spurs of the man who made 'em. *Pull off your spurs, Smokey, an' let us try 'em on those tracks, broken rowel an' all!*"

Dan came to his feet. He had told his story, guessing part of it, piecing out the rest from what he knew. He had seen the battered spurs that Darnell wore, had seen their broken rowel. They were old spurs, not good enough for show use and therefore left at the ranch during the show season.

Smokey Darnell did not move. His eyes darted to right and left like those of an animal caught in a trap.

"Pull 'em off, Smokey!" Dan repeated. "Or are you afraid to make the try?" He took a step forward and Bruce followed him.

TO Smokey Darnell it must have appeared that the two Mars were about to attempt the thing Dan had commanded him to do. He broke into action, his hand diving beneath his shirt and reappearing, filled with a weapon. He flung one hurried shot at Dan, a shot that whispered past and buried itself in the wall. And then before anyone could move, he had flung open the door and was gone.

Before Dan could reach the door, Murrah was in the opening. A shot flung Murrah back and down, blocking the door, holding back Purrington, Buck Ruffin and Garza. Tom Ruffin fell backward as his rocking chair capsized. With a scream Penny sprang to follow Dan, bumping into Bruce and throwing him off stride. Nevada did not scream but moved swiftly to Tom, bending to help him up.

Dan, jumping over the sheriff, was the first man out. He reached the edge of the porch as Darnell gained his horse. Darnell flung another shot and Dan dodged. Then the murderer was pounding away on his frightened horse.

Dan ran down the steps. As he reached the hitch rail, his horse pulled free; catching the flying reins, Dan jumped for the saddle. Purrington, Bruce Mar, Buck Ruffin, all came boiling out to the porch. Last of all came Tom Ruffin, supporting Murrah.

Bruce and Buck Ruffin ran down the steps and, mounting their horses,

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followed Dan. Meanwhile from the bunkhouse and cookshack Ruffin's cowhands came running, brought by the sound of the shots. On the porch Purrington slowly lowered the gun he held. There were too many in the way for him to shoot.

Darnell had almost reached the draw. Dan was nearly there, and halfway between draw and house Buck and Bruce Mar thundered after the two horsemen ahead. Smokey turned in his saddle and a flat report beat back to those on the porch. They saw Dan drop low in his saddle, saw Smokey's horse go into the draw and come scrambling out on the other side. They saw Dan reach the draw and disappear, and Smokey, atop the farther bank, wheel his mount and bring his arm level to shoot once more.

"Damn it!" Purrington exclaimed. "He can't miss. He can't!" The captain whipped up the gun he held and fired twice. Dust kicked up on the bank of the draw and Darnell, having fired, lifted his arm as though in salute, and rode on off toward the east. In the draw there was motion and then Dan's horse came scrambling up the bank bearing a hatless rider. Reaching the top, Dan followed after Smokey.

On the porch no one spoke. Men held their breaths and Penny made a small whimpering sound as Nevada's arm closed around her. Before their eyes a drama unfolded. They saw the horses close, saw Darnell look back and fire again, saw him turn and bend low, beating at his mount with an empty gun. They saw Dan Mar, straight in the saddle, hatless and his coat flying. It seemed as though the gap between the men remained constant, that neither horse could outdistance the other. Suddenly then Dan's arm lifted above his head and swept in swift circles.

BETWEEN house and draw Dan bent low and urged his horse for every bit of speed. He was riding a top cow horse of Ruffin's cavvy but so, too, was Smokey Darnell. Suddenly Dan saw his quarry turn, saw Darnell's face with the lips drawn back in a snarl. He saw the gun in Darnell's hand, saw it bounce, and something whispered past him. Then Darnell's horse dropped into the draw.

When Dan reached the draw, Darnell was across. Smokey turned and leveled the gun, and it seemed to Dan that he was staring directly into the muzzle. Lead slugged at him, scalding across his thigh, making his horse flinch and jump. Dan kicked with his spurs, forcing his mount up the bank. He did not see or feel Darnell's second shot. Atop the bank the distance closed a little; Darnell's deliberation had paid a dividend. The space closed a fraction, a little more, and then seemed fixed. Under him Dan's horse began to labor. He could not reach that other horse, could not get to him. There was about fifteen feet between them, and Dan could not lessen the distance. Rage filled Dan, anger at himself and at his horse. He spurred and cursed, but slowly the distance widened, inches at a time. Smokey Darnell was getting away, Smokey Darnell who had killed Carl, his friend.

Dan could not reach Darnell, could not tear him from the saddle, could not drag him down. But wait! There was a way to span that gap, a way to reach across it.

Dan's fingers fumbled with his rope strap and the rope came free. One end was tied hard and fast to the saddlehorn. There was a loop

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in the other end, a loop that grew and sang in Dan's hand as he circled it. Suddenly the rope shot out. The loop dropped fair and true about Smokey Darnell's neck, and Dan's mount, trained rope horse that he was, braked with sliding hind feet, squatted and sat down.

Under Dan's hand the rope jerked tight, singing like a fiddle string. Smokey Darnell's horse went on, but Darnell himself, snapped from the saddle, caught like a calf at branding time, jerked into the air and came down. Dan dropped from his horse and ran forward. Reaching the man, he bent and then, straightening, walked two slow steps toward his horse. There was no need to fall on and hold Smokey Darnell. Other hands than Dan's were holding him, would hold him forever.

Bruce and Buck Ruffin came thundering up, vanguard of the avalanche. Both dropped from their saddles and ran forward, Buck to Smokey Darnell, Bruce to his son. There was blood on Dan's leg where Darnell's bullet had grazed, and his eyes were dazed with shock. He stared at his father with no recognition in his eyes.

"He's dead! I didn't mean to kill him. I wanted to catch him an' bring him back!"

Bruce's arm shot out and caught his son's shoulder. "Yo're hurt!" he cried. "Yo're bleedin', Dan."

The first of the runners from the bunkhouse reached them.

They carried Smokey Darnell back across the draw and laid him on the porch. The rope mark encircled the dead man's neck and his head was queerly twisted. Bruce drew Dan into the house, and Penny, white-faced, followed them. The others clustered around the body and Tom Ruffin put his big arm protectively about Nevada's slim shoulders. Through that group Belle

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Darnell came and the others stepped back to give her space. She dropped beside her husband and for an instant all was still. Then Belle lifted the body gently and her voice was the low, small whimper of a wounded child.

"Smokey . . . Smokey . . . it wasn't worth it. All the money in the world wasn't worth it. I told you we shouldn't come back here. I told you!"

The men stood awkwardly, eyes averted from the grief-stricken woman. And in Ruffin's arms, Nevada's shoulders shook. Belle held her husband's body close and her voice went on, crying her hurt: "Smokey . . . Smokey—"

CHAPTER XX

KILLER'S BACK TRAIL

THE train was late and Art Murrah and Emil Garza were waiting, in Brule's depot. The sheriff, his arm in a sling, and shoulder and armpit bandaged where Darnell's lead had cut, bit off the end of his cigar as he sat down; and Garza, settling himself on the bench beside the sheriff, struck a match and lighted both cigars. He puffed a time or two and then smiled wryly.

"Well," he said, "I'm going back to work. Recently I've been thinking I'd better give up this business and take to farming."

"It makes a man feel that way." Murrah grinned around his cigar. "Still, you were right about one thing: It all boiled down to Ruffin's show."

"I can't figure how I made that mistake," Garza said. "I believed Mar was guilty and I couldn't get rid of the idea. Not even after Nevada told me that Mar had pulled me out from beneath a bunch of mules."

"What about me?" Murrah removed his cigar and looked at it.

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"We found that bullet in Carl's head an' Dan ran away. So I was sure he'd killed Carl. I went at that business wrong. If I'd questioned Dan instead of arrestin' him, we'd have been saved a lot of hard ridin'."

"And if I hadn't tried to put handcuffs on him, Mar wouldn't have run," Garza said. "I don't take any credit for this case. I did everything wrong from start to finish."

"But we got it settled," Murrah said with satisfaction.

"Because we had a lot of luck. Suppose Darnell hadn't hidden that money from the Stockman's Bank out at Ruffin's? Suppose he hadn't come back to get it? Suppose Mar hadn't discovered that Thwaite's spurs didn't fit those tracks across his saddle, or that Darnell had dug out those old spurs to wear when he rode with you? Most of it was luck, that's all I can say."

"Yeah, we were lucky," Murrah agreed. "Sure, we were lucky. I've been sheriff a long time an' I've found that most of it's luck an' hard work. Dan knew about those spur tracks an' he'd have told me. I'd have kept pluggin' away and I expect I'd have caught up with Smokey finally."

"Darnell's wife might have confessed," Garza said thoughtfully. "I don't know. She loved the man, but she was afraid of him. And she said that he was a woman chaser. She was jealous of him."

"Yeah," Murrah drawled. "Belle knew about Smokey killin' Carl, too. She told us that he'd threatened to kill her when they had a fight about Penny bein' in their act. He said he'd killed one man an' they wouldn't hang him any higher for killin' her, too. Remember?"

Garza nodded gravely.

"We'd have got him all right," Murrah declared. "It might have taken more time, but we'd have got him."

"Well"—Garza puffed thoughtfully—"Mar saved us a lot of trouble anyhow. He had things thought out just as I did, but he'd picked a different man."

"Smokey must have got hold of the letter Dan wrote me," Murrah said. "That's the only way I can figure it. An' when those two toughs jumped Dan they were tryin' to get rid of him."

Garza nodded. "It would have been a lot easier if Purrington hadn't shot so straight," he commented. "I had Nixon and Hart caught in Willow Bluffs and then the captain killed them."

MURRAH was pursuing another line of thought. "Halsey knew that Smokey had given Dan that money," he stated. "That would have cleared Dan. An' I'd have gone after Darnell as soon as I found that out. I tell you, Garza, a crook always makes a mistake."

"Darnell made several." Garza knocked ashes from his cigar. "Did you see Dan yesterday? He was in town."

"Came in to get a marriage license," Murrah said. "Yeah, I saw him."

"How was he feeling?"

"About killin' Smokey?" The sheriff puffed a time or two. "I don't know. I talked to Bruce an' he said that Dan was pretty low for a while. Bruce said he had to talk pretty straight to him. I don't know. I never felt bad about killin' a man that had it comin', an' Smokey Darnell had it comin' if anyone ever did. Dan will get over it. Penny will make him forget it."

Garza nodded. Outside the depot a whistle wailed and both men got up.

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"Here comes my train," the Pinkerton man remarked. "Well, Murrah, it's been a pleasure to work with you. If you come East be sure to look me up."

Murrah shook hands with him. "An' if you get out this way again an' need some help, I'll be glad to give you a lift," he said.

The eastbound limited halted outside the depot. Garza took his grip and, Murrah accompanying him, went to the platform. Red Halsey, disheveled and bleary-eyed, descended from the smoking car on the front of the train.

"There's Red now," Murrah said. "So long, Garza. Take care of yourself."

"Good-by, sheriff."

A porter took Garza's grip and the detective climbed the Pullman steps.

"*'Boooard!*" the conductor called, and lifted his hand.

Art Murrah advanced on Red Halsey.

"Where have you been?" he demanded of Red. "We could have used you around here a week ago."

"Where have I been?" Red glared belligerently at his questioner. "Drunk. An' what's it to you?"

The limited creaked as the wheels began to turn. Slowly it gathered headway, sliding past the depot.

THE smoke of the eastbound limited was visible from the porch of Ruffin's ranchhouse, a black smudge against the blue sky and snow-whitened horizon. Tom Ruffin and Nevada, standing on the porch, did not heed the smoke. The MY buckboard was drawn up below the steps and from the house came sound of progress as Bruce and Dan Mar brought Penny's trunk downstairs.

"Well, Nevada?" Ruffin said.

"Well, Tom?" Nevada smiled up at the big man beside her.

"It looks like you'd have to get another pardner next year."

"That's what it looks like."

"Don't you care?" Ruffin's eyes searched Nevada's face.

"Not any more," she answered honestly. "I did for a while, but I don't now. Dan's right for Penny and Penny's right for Dan."

"Who are you goin' to work with next season?" Ruffin asked.

"Dan gave me Domino. I'm going to train him this winter. He won't be as good as Gold, but I'll have an act, Tom."

"Hm-m-m," Ruffin said. "Well, it's somethin' to do. Goin' to be pretty quiet around here this winter. Just you an' Cap an' me, unless Red an' some of the boys get back. Penny gone. Dan gone. Smokey dead, an' Belle takin' him back home to bury him. You were pretty swell to stick to Belle the way you did, Nevada."

Nevada flushed faintly at the praise. "Somebody had to help her," she reminded.

"An' you did it," Ruffin said. "You know, Nevada—"

"Yes, Tom?"

"I told you once you didn't have to work unless you wanted to. That still goes." Ruffin's face was red.

Nevada put her hand on Ruffin's arm and he covered it with his palm. "Will you wait a while, Tom?" Nevada asked.

"I'll keep on waitin'," Ruffin said gruffly. "There's one thing you want to remember, Nevada. Yo're show people an' so am I. Show people ought to stick together."

"Show people," Nevada said, and smiled. "You're right, Tom. They do have to stick together."

Dan backed out on the porch car-

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rying the front of Penny's trunk. Bruce followed. "Set it down a minute, Dan," he commanded. "The blame' thing's heavy." They lowered the trunk and Bruce sat down on it. "Women," he announced, "must pack lead in their trunks. Ain't that right, Tom?"

"They pack somethin' in 'em," agreed Ruffin.

"Penny has clothes in that," Nevada informed them severely. "And she's going to need them all." She smiled at Dan. "I helped her pack them."

"Yeah." Bruce got up. "Well, you folks will be over Monday, won't you? You won't forget?"

"Forget?" said Ruffin. "When I'm supposed to give away the bride, an' Buck is best man? I'll say we won't forget."

"And I'm the bridesmaid," Nevada said. "I promised Penny I'd help her dress."

"Well," Bruce said apologetically, "I just thought I'd remind you. Ready, Dan?" He got up from the trunk. "Let's get this thing loaded. Wait till I get my end up— There!"

The trunk went down the steps and was lifted to the buckboard. Bruce climbed to the seat while Dan pushed the trunk well forward.

"See you Monday," Bruce called.

Dan came around the buckboard and smiled up at the two on the porch. "Come over early," he urged. "I'm goin' to need all the help I can get."

"We'll be over early," Nevada assured him. Dan climbed up and settled in the seat. The buckboard team, impatient, moved ahead.

"I hope," Nevada said softly, "that they'll be happy, Tom. I hope they'll be very happy."

Ruffin closed his hand on her fingers. "They will," he assured. "They'll be all right, an' they'll get along with Bruce. Did you notice, Nevada? Dan was drivin'."

THE END

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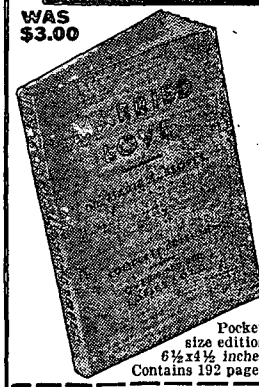

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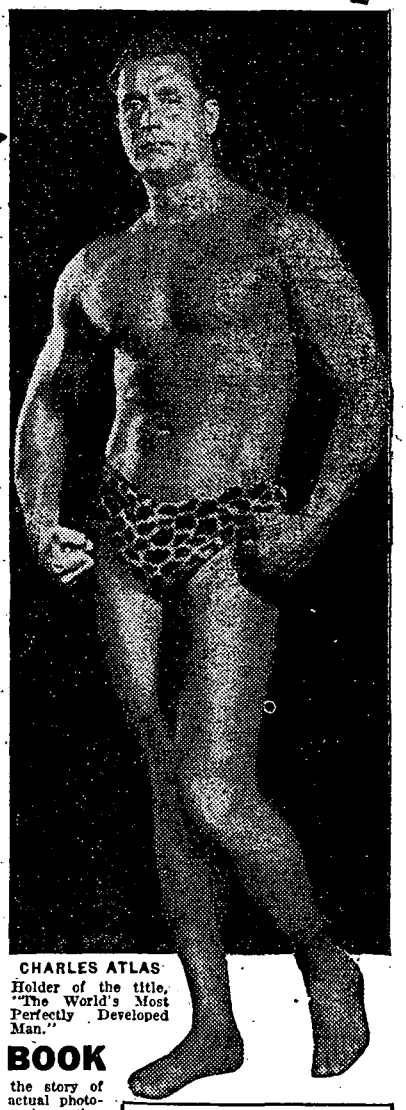

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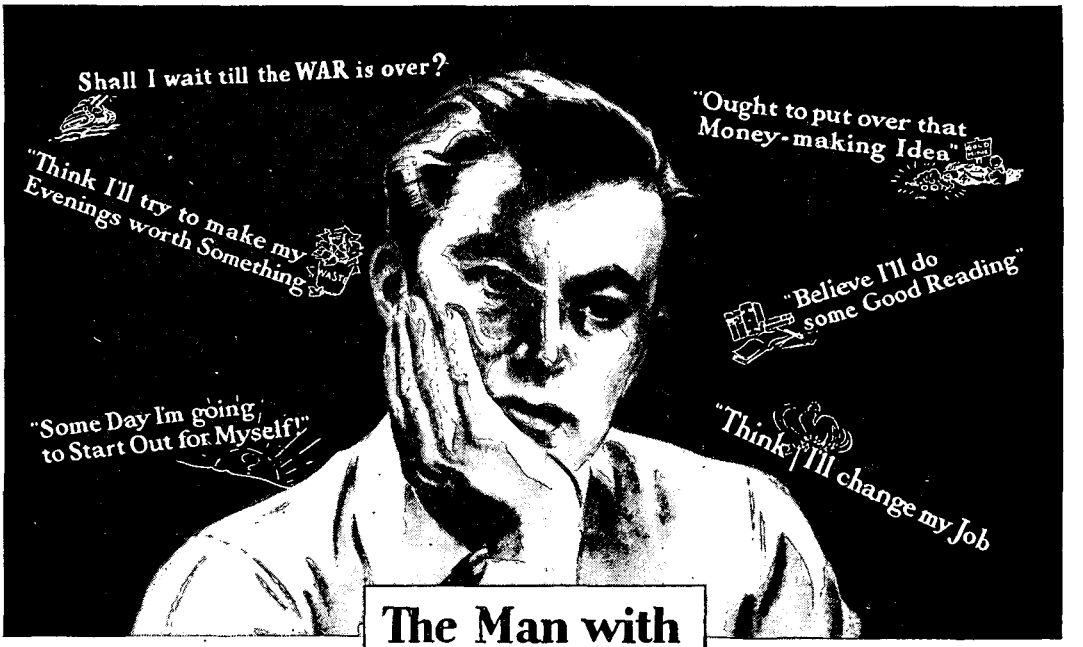

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